

**John Prestall:
A Complex Relationship with the
Elizabethan Regime.**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is the biography of John Prestall (c.1527-c.1598) an unsavoury, nefarious, and spendthrift Catholic gentleman from Elizabethan England. A conspirator, opportunist informer, conjurer, conman and alchemist Prestall's biography provides an alternative perspective from which to view Elizabethan history, exposing the dark fringe of the Elizabethan Court and the murky political underworld it attracted. In the polarised politico-religious ferment of late Tudor England Prestall, perennially in debt, utilised his occult powers for his own ruthless self-interest and preservation. In exploring Prestall's use of magic, this thesis demonstrates the important influence magic had on Elizabethan political conspiracies and Court politics. Within a society whose belief system held magic to be an inherent part of the natural world Prestall became a player in Elizabethan politics by using his astrological and alchemical talents to whatever ends he thought would provide the biggest payoff. He oscillated between using magic in conspiracies against both Mary I and Elizabeth I, and trading alchemical promises with members of the Elizabethan establishment for patronage, royal pardons, and safe passage from exile. Prestall's self-interest as the motivating factor for his actions presents an interesting contrast with those, such as his fellow conspirators and members of the Elizabethan government, whose actions were often dictated by their ideological views on the Catholic-Protestant clash. Through an examination of primary manuscripts and printed materials, this thesis situates Prestall in the broader context of Tudor England and uses his life as a conduit to link a sequence of previously unrelated plots, conspiracies and patronage relationships.

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ABBREVIATIONS

Add. MSS	Additional Manuscripts, British Library.
APC	J. R. Dasent, (eds.), <i>Acts of the Privy Council of England</i> , New Series, London, 1890-1964.
BL	British Library.
C	Chancery Records.
Cotton MS(S)	Cotton Manuscripts, British Library.
<i>CPR Elizabeth I</i>	<i>Calendar of the Patent Rolls, Elizabeth I</i> , London, 1939-1984.
CRS	Catholic Record Society.
<i>CSP Spanish</i>	<i>Calendar State Papers Relating to the Negotiations Between England and Spain Preserved in The Archives at Simancas and Elsewhere</i> , London, 1862-1954.
<i>CSP Venetian</i>	<i>Calendar of State Papers and Manuscripts Relating to English Affairs Existing in the Archives and Collections of Venice and in Other Libraries of Northern Italy</i> , London, 1864-1947.
DU	Dudley Manuscripts.
f(f).	Folio(s).
HoP <i>Commons</i> , 1509-1558	S. T. Bindoff (ed.), <i>History of Parliament, The House of Commons, 1509-1558</i> , 3 Vols, London 1982.
HoP <i>Commons</i> , 1558-1603	P.W. Hasler (ed.), <i>History of Parliament: House of Commons 1558-1603</i> , 3 Vols, London, 1981.
HMC <i>Salisbury</i>	Historical Manuscripts Commission, <i>Calendar of the Manuscripts of the Most Hon. The Marquis of Salisbury, K.G. preserved at Hatfield House, Hertfordshire</i> , London, 1883-1976.
KB	Kings Bench Court Records.

Lansdowne MS(S)	Lansdowne Manuscripts, British Library.
Longleat House MS(S)	Manuscripts belonging to the Marquis of Bath.
<i>LP Henry VIII</i>	J.S. Brewer, J. Gardiner, R.H. Brodie et al (eds.), <i>Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of the Reign of Henry VIII</i> , London, 1862-1932.
<i>ODNB</i>	<i>Oxford Dictionary of National Biography</i> , Online Edition, 2008, [http://www.oxforddnb.com].
PC	Privy Council Registers.
PROB	Prerogative Court of Canterbury, Will Registers.
REQ	Court of Request Records.
sig(s).	Signature(s).
SP	State Papers.
SR	A. Luders, T. E. Tomlins, J. France, W. E. Taunton and J. Raithby (eds.), <i>Statutes of the Realm, from Original Records and Authentic Manuscripts</i> , London, 1810-1828.
TNA	The National Archives, United Kingdom (formerly the Public Record Office (PRO)).

NOTE ON EDITORIAL POLICY

All manuscript sources quoted in this thesis are presented in the original spelling, grammar and punctuation. Spelling elisions and contractions are expanded and shown in parenthesis where required for clarity, though the sixteenth century usage of ‘ma^{tie}’ for ‘Majesty’, ‘th^t’ for ‘that’, ‘w^{ch}’ for ‘which’, ‘wth’ for ‘with’, and ‘y^e’ for ‘the’ have been left. To prevent confusion ‘M^r’ has been changed where it meant ‘Master’, but left where it stood for ‘Mr’. Personal names have been left in the favoured contemporary form, except where consistency is required.

Manuscripts quoted in this thesis are predominantly of English origin or predate the Gregorian calendar’s introduction in Catholic Europe in 1582; therefore all dates are given in the Julian calendar style. The New Year is taken as beginning on 1 January rather than 25 March, the date of New Year’s day in England until 1752. As such date-years have been adjusted where necessary.

INTRODUCTION

In 1603, John Norden published *A Pensive Soules Delight* (1603), which in grovelling, trite verses reviewed 'the sundry daungers, that have bene, and are daily plotted and practised, against her highnesse most innocent person, and Royall state'.¹ In response Norden recounted 'Elizaes grace' and 'Elizaes lenitie', not omitting the fact that 'Heavens Angels spred their still protecting tent,/And guard her sacred person innocent'.² The roll-call of 'Locust Catholickes' and their treasonous plot Norden expected his readers to recognise included many well-known to history, such as the 1569 Northern Rebellion and the Throckmorton Plot, and others less famous but still widely remembered, such Dr John Story, the canon lawyer kidnapped from the Netherlands in 1571 and subsequently executed for his conspiring from exile. Amongst the plots and plotters, which 'All men well know', Norden assumed his readers would remember the career of a Catholic plotter named 'Prestall'.³ Although at the time prominent enough for Norden to name him amongst the Catholic traitors, he has subsequently slipped into historical ambiguity, largely ignored by historians.

Norden claimed that Antichrist, in the person of the Pope and his Catholic minions, practised 'darknesse in the darke,/As devilish witchcraft, and the Magicke arts', against Elizabeth, 'And for his Nigromanticall practises/Pickes out infernall instruments for fact'.⁴ He names this Prestall as one such instrument, to whom 'The divel assured

¹ John Norden, *A Pensive Soules Delight. The Contents whereof, is shewen in these verses following. 1. The Pensive Soule recounteth in this place/Elizaes troubles, and Elizaes grace./2. Here are expressed the stratagemes of foes,//Elizaes conquests, and their falls that rose./3. Here is set forth Elizaes lenitie,/And Locust-Catholickes super bitie*, London, 1603, HEHL 62792.

² Norden, *A Pensive Soules Delight*, sigs. title page and B2r.

³ Norden, *A Pensive Soules Delight*, sig. D4r-v.

⁴ Norden, *A Pensive Soules Delight*, sig. D4r.

them Elizaes death/(He loves to lye) believe not what he saith'.⁵ Yet despite his necromantic plotting 'Prestall found a fayrer day,/Elizaes mercy, her revenge exceeds:/Though mercy in this case might well say nay'.⁶ In the official version spouted by Norden, Prestall's Catholic use of magic against Elizabeth I received mercy instead of the traitor's death such treason deserved. This locust Catholic named Prestall is John Prestall and Norden's tale is a simplified version of his life, pitching sinister Catholics against the firm but benevolent Protestant Queen, in a story thought suitable for public consumption. In reality, Prestall's story was far more complex and multifaceted, because he played both sides off against the middle with concern only for himself.

This thesis is the biography of John Prestall, a gentleman from Elizabethan England. However as Norden's barbed prose suggest, a gentleman in social rank only. He spent his life egotistically peddling his magical abilities to members of Elizabeth I's Court, and conspiring to replace Elizabeth with those disaffected by her Protestant rule. John Prestall's life weaves through the perverse and often baffling political underworld that existed on the penumbra of the salubrious Elizabethan Court. This thesis provides the most complete picture of John Prestall to date, placing him and his use of magic in the wider context of Elizabethan politics.

Born in 1527 and dying around 1598, John Prestall's life spans a fascinating time in England's history, where political and religious changes were interwoven. Prestall's biography opens an alternative view into this well trodden period of history, revealing aspects rarely examined by historians, especially the important influence magical and occult beliefs had in politics. Prestall has been described as having 'a complex and ambivalent relationship with the English government'.⁷ Prestall used his occult powers

⁵ Norden, *A Pensive Soules Delight*, sig. D4r.

⁶ Norden, *A Pensive Soules Delight*, sig. D4v.

⁷ Julian Lock, 'Story, John (1503/4?-1571)', *ODNB*, 2008, [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/26598>].

to conjure for conspiracies seeking regime change, which if successful would have seen him rewarded for his services to the new monarch. But Prestall also used claims of alchemical talent to extract himself from uncomfortable situations, seeking patrons to release him from prison or guarantee his security in exchange for promises of gold and medical elixirs.

On the groaning shelves of sixteenth century English histories, amongst the weighty tomes John Prestall has only a narrow corpus of references and no dedicated studies. Norden's simplistic handling of Prestall is uncannily prescient for how historians would treat him over the following four centuries. Here Prestall has been ill-served by the nineteenth century calendaring of sixteenth century manuscripts and their use by earlier historians. Despite the abundance of manuscript and primary print material concerning Prestall, he has been largely overlooked and there is nothing substantive written about him. Historians have not to date seen Prestall as warranting an entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (ODNB) although he is identified in several other entries.⁸ Where historians have identified Prestall as a historical actor, it is frequently as a demonstrative figure to make a point.⁹ They identify him in isolated incidents with no context to place his actions and occasionally misattributed him to events where he was not involved. Due to the thin corpus of work on Prestall those erroneous interpretations of him have had a knock-on effect, influencing later historians work.

The only substantial historical discussion of John Prestall appears in Ronald Pollitt's article 'The Abduction of Doctor John Story and the Evolution of Elizabethan

⁸ The two ODNB entries that name Prestall are: 'Story, John', *ODNB*; and William Wizeman, 'Fortescue, Sir Anthony (b. c.1535, d. in or after 1611)', *ODNB*, 2008, [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/9937>].

⁹ K.J. Kesselring is a good example of this because she uses Prestall to demonstrate the Tudor petitions system or as a conspirator and exile in Scotland: K. J. Kesselring, *Mercy and Authority in the Tudor State*, Oxford, 2003, p.113; K. J. Kesselring, *The Northern Rising of 1569: Faith, Politics and Protest in Elizabethan England*, Basingstoke, 2007, p.112 and K. J. Kesselring, 'Deference and Dissent in Tudor England: Reflections on Sixteenth-Century Protest', *History Compass*, Vol. 163, n.3, 2005, pp.10–11.

Intelligence Operations'(1983), that examines the first operation of the Elizabethan security apparatus under Sir William Cecil, first Baron of Burghley after 1571, and Elizabeth I's first Secretary of State.¹⁰ Pollitt conducted detailed manuscript research that highlighted John Prestall's presence in the Netherlands with Dr John Story, the English Catholic canon lawyer who sought exile in the Netherlands after opposing Elizabeth's religious settlement. Pollitt however gives an erroneous impression of Prestall. He concludes from the contradictory intelligence correspondence Cecil received that Prestall was an *agent provocateur* for Cecil with an excellent cover-story as a catholic conspirator allowing him access to the English exile community's inner circles. As Prestall is not the primary focus of Pollitt's article he give Prestall only a fleeting background to show he is a most 'unsavoury character'.¹¹ However a wider view of Prestall's life would have shown the contradictions in the letter's Cecil received dovetail neatly into Prestall's *modus operandi* playing both sides, probing for the best option to fulfil his self-interested wants.

Pollitt's conclusion of Prestall as ne'er-do-well agent, rather than an overt opportunist, is the product of the divisions in the sixteenth century manuscript collections. The surviving manuscript correspondence were broken up by historical accident when eighteenth century collectors divided them into their own personal collections and they now exist as separate manuscript collections such as Lansdowne and Cotton in the British Library. This fragmentation was then extended in the nineteenth century when the State Papers manuscript collection, now held in the National Archives in London, was divided and calendared thematically into State Papers Domestic, State Papers Foreign and State Papers Scotland for each monarch. Despite Pollitt's impressive manuscript research, he could not get hold of the State Papers Foreign and instead

¹⁰ Ronald Pollitt, 'The Abduction of Doctor John Story and the Evolution of Elizabethan Intelligence Operations', *Sixteenth Century Journal*, Vol. 14, 1983, pp. 131-156.

¹¹ Pollitt, 'The Abduction of Doctor John Story', p.137.

resorted to using the Calendars. The deviations between the brief calendar entries Pollitt used and the manuscript's actual contents obscured details that if Pollitt had researched he would have made a very different conclusion concerning Prestall's activities. Especially the fact that Cecil seriously considered abducting Prestall from Scotland in late 1569, a year before he had Story kidnapped.

The Calendars are an excellent inroad into the large manuscript collections, but severely lacking for those who have used them as a source in themselves rather than to access the manuscripts. The Calendars, published in the nineteenth century, *précis* the contents of manuscripts with varying degrees of detail for each entry depending on when the Calendar was compiled. Calendaring of the State Papers, Domestic for Edward VI, Mary I and Elizabeth I to 1580 has entries that are particularly brief and vague, limited to a three sentence maximum regardless of the length of the manuscript. Thus in themselves the Calendars are fascinating historical artefacts providing an insight into how Victorians saw Tudor England, but not compatible with studying figures from Tudor history who were not prominent figures. Stephen Alford summed up the position of the Calendars when he said, 'When we look at these Tudor sources we have to recognise that we view them through a Victorian Lens'.¹² The Calendar compilers, who sifted through the manuscripts, had to decide the important historical points of each manuscript. Thus in the wider milieu of the Victorian view of the past, priority was given to perceptions of the Elizabethan Golden Age and prominent Elizabethan figures who they thought had influenced its development.

John Prestall's biography certainly does not fit with the Victorian and early twentieth century idealised view of the Elizabethan era as the Golden Age, so entries for

¹² Stephen Alford, 'Introduction to *State Papers Online* and the Sixteenth Century State Papers, 1509-1603', *State Papers Online 1509-1603*, 2008, [<http://gale.cengage.co.uk/images/Alford%20Introduction%20to%20Part%20One.pdf>].

him are short, ambiguous and inadequate for tracing his life. A good example of this discrepancy between the Calendar entries and the manuscripts is a citation in the, *Calendar of State Papers Domestic: Edward VI, Mary, Elizabeth I and James I, Volume I: 1547-1580* (1856), that states:

21 May 1565 Basingstoke. Earl of Pembroke to Leicester and Cecill. His own ill health. Intercedes for the pardon of one Prestcott, an offender.¹³

In the corresponding manuscript Pembroke tells Cecil of ‘the greate offer of one Prestoll’ to use alchemy to cure his poor health.¹⁴ This point is completely lacking from Calendar’s *précis* that does not treat the manuscript’s contents as connected and downplays Pembroke’s occult beliefs. The divergence between manuscript and Calendar is also extenuated here by the misspelling of Prestall’s name.

While Pollitt explored Prestall’s association with Dr John Story and his abduction in 1570, most references to Prestall deal with his spirit summoning and horoscope casting in a Catholic conspiracy against Elizabeth I in 1562. These references occur in general studies of early modern English witchcraft and magic, using Prestall’s summoning of spirits to demonstrate that ‘those engaged in hazardous political enterprises were indeed particularly likely to have recourse to some magical aid’.¹⁵ Written in the twentieth century these general histories all use a similar formulaic structure because they utilise the work of John Strype (1642-1737), the eighteenth century antiquarian, or other general

¹³ R. Lemon, (ed.), *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, of the Reigns of Edward VI, Mary I, Elizabeth I*, Vol. I: 1547-1580, London, 1856, p. 272, n.74.

¹⁴ TNA SP 12/39 f.188r, The Earl of Pembroke to William Cecil, 21 May 1566.

¹⁵ Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century England*, London, 1971, reprinted 1991, p.376. Thomas discusses Prestall’s 1262 conspiracy against Elizabeth I in his landmark book *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971) but does not name him. Instead, Thomas refers to Prestall only as ‘a conjurer’ despite citing George Lyman Kittredge’s *Witchcraft in Old and New England*, New York, 1929, reprinted 1956, a general witchcraft history that identifies Prestall as ‘a gentleman of Surrey ... [who] was somehow of kindred to the Poles’ (p.261).

witchcraft histories. The illumination of Prestall's horoscope casting in general witchcraft studies has had little impact on historians' perceptions of Prestall because of their repetitive nature and none have led to a further expansion of research into Prestall's life.

Strype was the first historian to mention Prestall, and provides a reasonable summary of some of his conspiracies and imprisonments for those willing to hunt through his multi-volume, *Annals of the Reformation and Establishment of Religion, and Other Various Occurrences in the Church and State of England, From the Accession of Queen Elizabeth to the Crown, Anno 1558 to the Commencement of the Reign of King James I (1709-1731)*.¹⁶ Strype had access to several of the large manuscript collections still used by historians today that he methodically worked his way chronologically through the manuscripts, addressing events as they arose and transcribing large swathes of the manuscripts' contents into his own work. Strype's mentions Prestall as he appeared in the manuscripts he read, but did not link or consolidate Prestall's activities, instead addressing each time Prestall appears as isolated incidents. Thus, Strype's approach provided a neatly packaged nodule for English witchcraft histories to include as an example of political prophesy. However wider research, within Strype's *Annals*, but also in the manuscript collections Strype used, would have shown historians that Prestall's life makes an excellent wider case study for the uses of magic in early modern England with numerous usable examples for the points they set out in their histories. The issue with Strype's *Annals*, and his publication of many sixteenth century primary sources, has meant it is widely consulted by historians, but its very accessibility has often discouraged further research into Strypes' original sources.

¹⁶ John Strype, *Annals of the Reformation and Establishment of Religion, and Other Various Occurrences in the Church and State of England, From the Accession of Queen Elizabeth to the Crown, Anno 1558. to the Commencement of the Reign of King James I. Together with Appendix*, 2 Vols., London, 1725, 3rd edition, 1735.

Norman Jones has provided a detailed academic treatment of the same 1562 conjuring incident summarised in general witchcraft histories, but concentrates on the Waldegrave Affair of 1561 and its contribution to passing of Elizabeth I's first witchcraft legislation in 1563. In his works *Birth of the Elizabethan Age: England in the 1560s* (1995) and 'Defining Superstitions: Treasonous Catholics and the Act Against Witchcraft of 1563' (1998) Jones does not name Prestall instead referring to him as 'an astrologer' and a 'conjurer' while identifying two of Prestall's co-conspirators, Arthur and Edmund Pole.¹⁷ Jones may have named Prestall's associates, and not Prestall, because he already had known historical and hystoiographical pedigrees. Rather than using Strype to discuss events, Jones engaged with a wide range of primary sources, many that clearly identify Prestall as the conjurer. But Jones overlooked these references and misattributes Prestall's earlier conjuring in 1558 to a different pair of astrologers.¹⁸ The issue with Jones' work, as elucidated in chapter two, is he conflates events in the Waldegrave affairs and Prestall's conspiratorial horoscope casting, overplaying the Waldegrave Affair's direct impact on the passing of 1563's witchcraft legislation and underplaying Prestall's conspiracy. He also gives the impression the events occurred co-currently and in 1561.

The dearth of information written on Prestall has meant Pollitt's article and Jones' chapter have had an overdue influence on Prestall's image, as they are the academic works historians turn to when searching for details on Prestall. K. J. Kesselring has stumbled upon John Prestall in her research into early modern British law, crime and protest. In her book *The Northern Rising of 1569: Faith, Politics and Protest in Elizabethan England* (2007), Kesselring highlights Prestall as 'one of the stranger

¹⁷ Norman Jones, 'Defining Superstitions: Treasonous Catholics and the Act Against Witchcraft of 1563', in Charles Carlton, Robert L Woods, Mary L. Robertson, and Joseph S. Block (ed.), *State, Sovereigns and Society In Early Modern England: Essays in Honour of A.J. Slavin*, New York, 1998, pp.187-203; Norman Jones, *The Birth of the Elizabethan Age: England in the 1560s*, Oxford and Cambridge (MA), 1995, pp.36-38.

¹⁸ Jones, 'Defining Superstitions', footnote. 34.

conjunction of spying and plotting' in the Northern rising and the rebels flight into Scotland, because he was pursued by agents of the Elizabethan state.¹⁹ Unable to clarify the reasons for Prestall's pursuit, and his activities in Scotland, Kesselring turns to Prestall's previous conspiring and falls into confusion around Prestall's activities. Interpreting, through Jones' explanation of events, a calendar of Patent Rolls entry that discusses the events of Prestall's spirit conjuring in September 1562, she concludes an involvement in the supposedly discovered conspiracy of 1561. Kesselring then insists in the absence of evidence for Prestall's actions in the Northern Rising, his 'offer of aid to the rebels was presumably disingenuous', and then taking Pollitt's argument, argued 'in the interval between 1561 and 1569 rebellion, it seems that Prestall had himself become an operative in Cecil's extensive spy network'.²⁰

With previous work on Prestall ill-served by the disparate nature of the different manuscript collections, this thesis utilises the diverse selection of sixteenth century manuscript collections in conjunction with contemporary printed sources now digitised and grouped into online databases. Along with the Tudor government's everyday working papers and correspondence from the State Papers Domestic, Foreign and Scotland, the Lansdowne Papers and the Cecil papers at Hatfield House, court records are employed to discuss details of Prestall's life. Records, such as Court of Chancery records were authenticated property records so survived because they proved title ownership and the Kings Bench was both a political and criminal court so the records survived because they were politically significant. Unfortunately the manuscripts, reveal only Prestall's political life. This is an unavoidable consequence of the scope and focus of these state generated documents. The political nature of the manuscripts material

¹⁹ Kesselring, *The Northern Rising of 1569*, p.112.

²⁰ Kesselring, *The Northern Rising of 1569*, p.112.

explains their survival, but limits any biography using them as they only allow focus on an individual's public and political life.

The inseparability of religion and politics meant Elizabethan England was a confessional state that persecuted those who would not conform to the Government prescribed brand of Protestantism. As a Catholic John Prestall faced persecution along side the rest of England's Catholics. The Elizabethan regime's strict religious settlement caused opposition from diehard Catholics who conspired to unseat Elizabeth I from her throne thereby restoring Catholicism as England's state religion. Here Prestall's skills as a conjurer proved useful to conspirators and dissidents. But Prestall has left no evidence of being ideologically driven and was instead influenced by his personal opportunism more than his Catholicism, and historians have not adequately addressed people like Prestall in their accounts of Elizabethan Catholic England.

Recent studies by historians have taken a less sectarian approach, synthesising the previously dichotomised Post-Reformation Catholic and Protestant studies of sixteenth century England. This new approach has led to a downplaying of the previous hagiography in writing on Catholic England. Historians have begun to re-examine England's Catholic community, recognising that large areas of the country remained Catholic well into Elizabeth's reign.²¹ The picture these histories have presented is one of a complex Catholic community torn between their faith and their monarch, a community whose historical reputation was damaged by a minority who sought regime

²¹ For examples of historians approaches see: John Bossy, *The English Catholic Community: 1570-1850*, New York, 1976; John Bossy, 'The Character of Elizabethan Catholicism', *Past and Present*, no. 21, April, 1962, pp.39-59; Ethan H. Shagan (ed.), *Catholics and the 'Protestant Nation': Religious Politics and Identity in Early Modern England*, Manchester, 2005; Michael A. Mullet., *Catholics in Britain and Ireland: 1558-1829*, Basingstoke, Hampshire and London, 1998; Michael C. Questier, *Catholicism and Community in Early Modern England: Politics, Aristocratic Patronage and Religion, c.1550-1640*, Cambridge, 2006.

change. This has left a void between the historical studies of Elizabethan England's Catholic enemies, particularly the Jesuit priests, and the studies of the majority of the English Catholic community that tried to scratch out a living in the troubled Elizabethan period. In this historiographical void sits John Prestall who conspired against the Elizabethan regime, not from the stance of Counter-Reformation ideological Catholicism, but opportunistically pursuing his own self-interest.

The religious nature of the Elizabethan government has also been re-interpreted in recent historical studies.²² This is especially so for Elizabeth's Protestant Privy councillors whose roles have been reviewed and re-evaluated. The debate around this re-interpretation has, largely focused on the large and historically visible conspiracies of Elizabethan England, but spans the whole of Elizabethan politics. Historians have recognised that the Elizabethan regime lacked the means to mount a coherent campaign to denounce Catholicism in England.²³ Instead the re-interpretation of Elizabethan politics has seen a shift in the understanding of the men on the Privy Council and their motives for acting, which has significant implications for John Prestall's biography.

Historians like Francis Edwards have argued that Cecil operated for his own self-interest and personal power accumulation.²⁴ He argues Cecil cynically concocted stories around each conspiracy's discovery to implicate his personal political opponents and

²² Patrick Collinson, 'The Politics of Religion and the Religion of Politics in Elizabethan England', *Historical Research*, Vol 82, no. 215, February, p.74-92.

²³ Peter Lake, 'A Tale of Two Episcopal Surveys: The Strange Fates of Edmund Grindal and Cuthbert Mayne Revisited', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Sixth Series, no.18, 2008, pp. 129-63; Peter Lake, 'The Monarchical Republic of Queen Elizabeth I' (and the Fall of Archbishop Grindal) Revisited', John McDiarmid (ed.), *The Monarchical Republic of Early Modern England: Essays in Response to Patrick Collinson*, Aldershot, 2007, pp.129-158.; Peter Lake, 'The Monarchical Republic of Elizabeth I' Revisited (by its victims) as a Conspiracy', in Barry Coward and Julian Swann (eds.), *Conspiracies and Conspiracy Theory in Early Modern Europe: From the Waldensians to the French Revolution*, Aldershot, 2004, pp.87-111; Collinson, 'The Politics of Religion and the Religion of Politics', pp.74-92.

²⁴ Francis Edwards, *Plots and Plotters in the Reign of Elizabeth I*, Dublin, 2002; Francis Edwards, *The Marvellous Chance: Thomas Howard, Fourth Duke of Norfolk, and the Ridolphi Plot, 1570-1572*, London, 1968.

suggests Cecil had a template he placed over discovered conspiracies and manipulated the evidence to stir public hostility and increase his political power.²⁵ Edwards argues that Cecil passed this template onto his son, Robert Cecil, to use when he became Secretary of State. Hence, according to Edwards, all the conspiracies from the Ridolfi plot in 1571, to Robert Devereux, the second Earl Essex's conspiracy in 1601 contain similar elements of invasion, domestic rebellion and political assassination all massaged to fit circumstances by William and Robert Cecil.

Edwards' argument has been supplanted by a re-interpretation of the religious nature of the Elizabethan Privy Council. Historians have begun to see the majority of Elizabeth's Privy Council as ideological Protestants. This is an important point to recognise to help explain the Privy Council's dealing with Prestall. Stephen Alford described Cecil's Protestant ideology as that of a man who 'believed to the core of his being that the Protestant England he had helped to build was engaged in a great war against the Antichrist of the Roman Catholic Church'.²⁶ A belief, Patrick Collinson emphasises was not held by Cecil alone, observing that the Privy Council was populated by the 'hotter sort of Protestants' and 'Anti-Catholicism became the defining ideology, if not of the nation [then] of dominant forces within the nation'.²⁷ Because most of the source material we have for Prestall's biography originated from the Privy Council, the Protestant ideology of its creators is an important characteristic because it clouds the reality surrounding Prestall as an opportunist. The Privy Council records and printed works, like Nordens, that sprouted from the government's official line give observers the impression Prestall was a diehard Catholic, opposed to Protestantism and Elizabeth I. The Protestant ideological belief that every Catholic wanted to destroy Protestant

²⁵ Edwards, *Plot and Plotters*, pp.13-1. Edwards' introduction to *Plots and Plotters* gives an excellent summary of his argument.

²⁶ Stephen Alford, *Burghley: William Cecil at the Court of Elizabeth I*, New Haven, 2008, p.xii.

²⁷ Collinson, 'The Politics of Religion and the Religion of Politics', pp.79, 80.

England that was held by the Privy Council and fuelled by an inability to contemplate Prestall as a self-interested mercenary using sorcery and alchemy for his own gains.

John Prestall was on the receiving end of this Protestant ideological view. Cecil viewed Prestall's conspiring as part of the wider Catholic threat to England, and as such treated and manipulated Prestall's conspiring to use in his war against Catholicism. Peter Lake has moved away from the historically visible and extensively studied conspiracies to look at events such as the fates of Bishop Edmund Grindal, and a Roman Catholic, Cuthbert Mayne, along with how Catholic England saw Cecil's interregnum plans in the 1580s.²⁸ While these specific events do not appear in Prestall's biography, Lake's wider conclusions are important when considering Prestall. Lake's key finding is that most events that came to Cecil's attention were not seen as discrete conspiracy

nor a concatenation of mere coincidences, but rather a series of dialectically patterned contingencies. Discrete events, set off by or within a particular ideological moment, were associated together, glossed and deployed, to further a set of increasingly pointed and coherent ideological and political purposes.²⁹

According to Lake, because of their Protestant ideology the Privy Council and especially Cecil were willing to do whatever was necessary to combat the threat and considered what they were doing as 'not manipulation, intimidation and hyperbole, or still less dissimulation and tyranny. It was rather a necessary service to the common good and defence of the realm'.³⁰

Prestall's biography makes a good test case for Lake's arguments with Prestall's constant interaction with the Elizabethan regime, and it connects together events that have not previously been connected and studied. It provides a unique conduit through

²⁸ Lake, 'A Tale of Two Episcopal Surveys', pp.129–63; Lake, 'The Monarchical Republic of Queen Elizabeth I' Revisited', 129-148; Lake, 'The Monarchical Republic of Elizabeth I' Revisited (by its victims)', pp.87-111.

²⁹ Lake, 'A Tale of Two Episcopal Surveys', p.147.

³⁰ Lake, 'A Tale of Two Episcopal Surveys', p154.

Elizabethan politics that allows interpretation of Cecil's political machinations and those of his fellow Privy councillors. Prestall's life shows that the Elizabethan regime operated against Catholic threats through a 'combination of conviction and manipulation of realpolitick with ideologically enflamed fantasy' that excluded the possibility of coincidence.³¹ Prestall's biography introduces magic as a political weapon as a previously unexamined variable to test the current historiography. Not only did Protestant politicians fret about Elizabeth's assassination with a bullet or blade, they also had to contend with the ever present knowledge that Catholic dissidents were conjuring for her destruction. This has important implications for historians' understanding of Elizabethan national security.

Prestall's biography bridges the historical fields of Elizabethan Court politics and early modern magic beliefs demonstrating a tight interlacing between magic and politics. Historians of the Elizabethan Court and politics have discounted the occult beliefs of Court politicians, preferring to concentrate on the intrigues and factions at Court, overlooking the large role magic played. Recent work on Court figures such as Cecil and Leicester largely ignored any interest they had in the occult arts.³² While magic and occult forces are recognised as part of the early modern world view shaping society's perception of the natural world, historians to date have not calculated it into their analysis of Court figures. None of the politicians encountered in Prestall's biography have had their belief in magic incorporated into their lives by their biographers. Many Court figures delved into the Court's murky penumbra following their greed to patronise

³¹ Lake, 'A Tale of Two Episcopal Surveys', p.154.

³² Examples of works that do not account for Elizabethan Court politicians' occult beliefs are: Alford, *Burghley*; Felicity Heal and Clive Holmes, 'The Economic Patronage of William Cecil', in Pauline Croft, (ed.), *Patronage, Culture and Power: the Early Cecils*, New Haven, 2002, pp.199-229; Simon Adams, *Leicester and the Court: Essays on Elizabethan Politics*, Manchester, 2002.

individuals, like Prestall, who promised alchemical riches and medical cures, or, like the Court's opponents, they frequented the same conjurers to employ magic for murder and more often astrology to gain insider knowledge on the future.

Historians have previously omitted to connect Court politics with courtiers and politician's magic beliefs because no detailed studies of the Court's fringe, that include magician's activities, have been conducted. Few courtiers actually got their hands dirty performing astrology and alchemy, instead they dabbled in occult practices through those who gathered at the Court fringe offering their services. This penumbral region has been largely ignored by Elizabethan Court historians, who have instead concentrated on the Court's internal structures and intrigues as the dynamic for Court politics, and not the influence of occult beliefs or of those who gravitated to its edges.³³ Studying the Court in this way has disconnected it from the rest of Elizabethan society. Prestall's biography shows that on the Court's fringes existed a murky political underworld where Prestall and those of his ilk existed and occasionally flourished, conspiring and collaborating with whoever would afford them the best deal to satisfy their own interests.

The political fringe that circled the royal Court overlaps in places with modern ideas of the Elizabethan underworld. However little historical work has been produced on this topic. The underworld here is not English literature's idealised Southwark streets trodden by Shakespeare and amorphously defined by Gāmini Salgādo as a space of everyone from pickpockets through to women, the insane and everyone who walked the streets of Elizabethan London.³⁴ Instead the political underworld is the subterranean

³³ Court historians such as: David Loades, *The Tudor Court*, London, 1986, reprinted 1992; David Loades, *Tudor Government: Structures of Authority in the Sixteenth Century*, Oxford, 1997; Penry Williams, *The Tudor Regime*, Oxford, 1979; David Starkey (ed.), *The English Court: From the War of the Roses to the Civil War*, London, 1987; G.R. Elton, *The Tudor Revolution in Government: Administrative Changes in the Reign of Henry VIII*, London, 1953; G.R. Elton, *Studies in Tudor and Stuart politics and Government: Papers And Reviews*, 1946-1990, New York, 1974, reprinted 1983.

³⁴ Gāmini Salgādo, *The Elizabethan Underworld*, New York, 1992.

world of spies and informants, conspirators and conjurers: anyone who gravitated to the edge of the Elizabethan Court seeking patronage with their unique set of talents that would have been illegal without Royal licence. The political underworld also attracted those who sought to change the regime and replace it with one that would provide them with patronage. Patronage structured all early modern societies; it was no different in Elizabethan England's political underworld. Nefarious individuals vied for the attention of Elizabeth's courtiers, offering their services and playing off one another, denouncing and outdoing each other with offers of service, and always talking up their abilities. All hoped to be patronised and receive the gifts and rewards that naturally resulted from the patron-client relationship. The Court's fringe was a very cut throat environment with much at stake.

The only historical discussions that have strayed into the political underworld are the investigations into Elizabethan espionage. Commonly referred to as the Elizabethan secret service, Pollitt's article discussing the Elizabethan security apparatus' abduction of Dr John Story is from the Elizabethan espionage and intelligence field. However, Pollitt's article and John Bossy's forensically detailed work are exceptional.³⁵ Predominantly historians in this field have centred their studies around the narrative of the major figures involved, such as William and Robert Cecil, Francis Walsingham and Mary Queen of Scots using their lives as the narrative basis for their books that have been written for a popular history market rather than an academic audience. These works are high politics histories giving accounts of gentlemen spies and their letter interceptions

³⁵ John Bossy, *Giordano Bruno and The Embassy Affair*, New Haven, 1991; John Bossy, *Under the Molehill: An Elizabethan Spy Story*, New Haven, 2001. Though not related to Prestall directly, John Bossy's work should be mentioned here. His thoroughly researched books examine the complexity of the political landscape and its underworld to a degree not seen in other Elizabethan intelligence history. A complexity that, as John Prestall's experiences show, John le Carre would struggle to articulate, with its fluid categories of intelligencers, opportunists, informers, conspirators and criminals. Bossy examines the events around infiltrating the French Embassy in London and the espionage around uncovering what Bossy believes were genuine French plans to invade England in 1580s, to restore Catholicism with Mary, Queen of Scots on the English throne.

and infiltrations, rather than the grubby cloak and dagger business of conjuring horoscopes and death, which at the time was perceived as a very real threat.

The two main books on the topic, both called *The Elizabethan Secret Service* by Alison Plowden (1991) and Alan Haynes (1992, reprinted 2000) give a general overview and both predominantly utilise primary and secondary print material.³⁶ Haynes refers to Prestall in his book's introduction where he profusely parrots Pollitt's article while Plowden writing twelve years after the publication of Pollitt's article omits the abduction of Dr John Story and does not refer to Prestall at all in her book. Haynes' and Plowden both weave the secret politics of the Elizabethan regime through the great conspiracies that lurched the Elizabethan age forward, starting in 1570, and give attention to Walsingham and the Cecils' manoeuvrings, showing the importance of spies and espionage networks. These general histories that dominate the Elizabethan intelligence history field fail to capture the complexity that existed in the fragile climate of post-Reformation England with the kidnappings, surveillance, counter-espionage, theft, lying and murders that stained Elizabethan England.

No one akin to Prestall from the Elizabethan Court's fringe has received an in-depth study. The Cambridge educated Dr John Dee is an exception that proves the rule with a library of books about him. Thus, it is difficult to know how representative Prestall is of those who moved to the Court's fringe seeking patronage. His opportunism and pursuit of patronage were not unique and others with similar traits gravitated to the royal Court, as is seen with John Dee. The reason Prestall stands out from the numerous other shadowy rogues is he unintentionally left an abundant manuscript record as Burghley and his agents watched and documented his involvement in a long line of

³⁶ Alison Plowden, *The Elizabethan Secret Service*, Hemel Hempstead, 1991; Alan Haynes, *The Elizabethan Secret Service*, Stroud, 1992, reprinted 2000. Haynes book was originally title *The Invisible Hand: The Elizabethan Secret Service*, but the first half of the title has been dropped in subsequent reprints.

historically fascinating and important events in late Tudor Britain. This wealthy manuscript record is despite only two of his own letters surviving.³⁷

There are two figures from the criminal underworld that suggest Prestall's opportunism and occult peddling were not unique. Gregory Wisdom and Simon Forman, both from the London criminal landscape, have received historian's attention. Wisdom was examined by Alec Ryrice because he left legal records when he conned Lord Henry Neville, and then bribed his way into the Royal College of Physicians so he could peddle his self taught brand of medicine.³⁸ A.L. Rowse, Barbara Howard Traister and Lauren Kassell have written on Simon Forman, the astrologer physician, who wrote prolifically at the time, jotting down his daily experiences and events occurring around him.³⁹ Here Forman diverges from Prestall, as unfortunately Prestall did not leave the trove of his own writing to identify himself as an individual set apart from the largely communal society that existed in early modern England. To know Prestall it is necessary to piece together the impression others have left of him, whether they be the writings of informers and courtiers or depositions from court trials.

This biography draws on the vast manuscript repositories to layout John Prestall's life in the ideologically riven world of sixteenth century England. Structured chronologically, John Prestall's biography presents him as an individual historical actor, but also uses his life as a conduit to weave together the events he participated in, and a sequence of events that have not previously been linked. This thesis is divided into four chapters, each dealing with a sequential span of Prestall's life.

³⁷ These two letters are: TNA SP 12/31 f.20r, John Prestall to Sir William Cecil, 30 November 1563 and BL Lansdowne MS 46 f.45r, John Prestall from the Tower to Lord Burghley, October 1585.

³⁸ Alec Ryrice, *The Sorcerer's Tale: Faith and Fraud in Tudor England*, Oxford, 2008.

³⁹ A.L. Rowse, *Simon Forman: Sex and Society in Shakespeare's Age*, London, 1974; Barbara Howard Traister, *The Notorious Astrological Physican of London: Works and days of Simon Forman*, Chicago, 2001; Lauren Kassell, *Medicine and magic in Elizabethan London: Simon Forman : Astrologer, Alchemist and Physician*, Oxford, 2005; Lauren Kassell, 'Forman, Simon (1552–1611)', *ODNB*, 2008, [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/9884>].

Chapter One examines Prestall's family background, because at the end of Prestall's life he claimed to be related to the Pole family, distant Plantagenet claimants to the English throne. It looks back as far as possible, over two generations to John Prestall's grandfather Elias Prestall and his arrival in Sussex at the start of the sixteenth century, and analyses the Prestall family's social mobility over those two generations from yeoman to esquire gentry. Then we see John Prestall's fall from being a respectable gentry family to becoming a ne'er-do-well and gentleman in title only. John Prestall's decline saw him selling the family lands to pay his debts, his inclusion in the Dudley conspiracy of 1556 and attempting to flee abroad to avoid the writ for his arrest relating to his debts. Finally in chapter One we see Prestall's marriage, and his theft of his twelve year old stepson, Henry Owen's, inheritance through extortion, blackmail and appalling exchanges of Prestall's hollow promise of alchemical gold in London, for Henry Owen accepting his debts.

Chapter Two analyses John Prestall's activities during the final years of Mary's reign and the first decade of Elizabeth I's reign. It examines Prestall conspiring against Mary I and Elizabeth I, between 1556 and 1567. It begins with his first conspiracy against Mary I where he had a marginal role and then follows his conspiring against Elizabeth in the 1560s. It investigates Prestall's use of magic in initial years of the succession crisis where he conjured for disgruntled Catholics who sought to replace Elizabeth I and restore Catholic England. It outlines Prestall's conjuring in 1558 and 1562 and how Cecil used it to cajole Parliament into passing his anti-Catholic Witchcraft Act in 1563. The chapter also considers how Prestall unsuccessfully tried to use claims of occult knowledge to curry favour with Cecil to extract himself from exile in the Netherlands, and then successfully used hints of his alchemical knowledge to obtain the Earl of Pembroke's patronage to have him released from the Tower of London.

Chapter Three considers John Prestall's actions from 1569 to 1579. Beginning with the Northern Rising in 1569, this chapter follows Prestall into exile first in Scotland and then on to the Netherlands, where in both places his alchemical conjuring and conspiring, impacted on politics in both Scotland and England. It also records Prestall's experience as a conspirator and informant whilst in exile in the 1570s and his obscured activities around the abduction of Dr John Story. An event exponentially more complicated than Norden's account. It reveals important insights into the complicated nature of Elizabethan politics in aspects that have been overlooked by historians. With the intrigue around Prestall's return to England and imprisonment in 1572, the chapter then moves to Prestall's possible alchemical coining for the men he convinced should pay his enormous bond of bail for his release from imprisonment. The chapter then examines Prestall's discrediting of another alchemist, William Medley, the Queen's only licence holder resulting imprisonment and reopening the alchemical patronage market. The chapter then explores the wax image incident where Prestall is wrongly accused, because he fitted the Privy Council model for the type of person who would have tried to kill Elizabeth with dark magic by enchanting wax images. The chapter concludes with Prestall being held in the Tower because the Privy Council had overreacted to the images discovery, blinkered by their anti-Catholicism and did not want to lose face.

Chapter Four shows Prestall's decline and final disappearance. It begins with Prestall in the Tower where he remained for a decade. The chapter explores Prestall's pursuit of a patron to release him in exchange for his alchemical abilities. It examines the power of alchemy to draw political foes together, when Ormond and Leicester, who had become political opponents, collaborated to release Prestall to alchemically cure their poor health. Once released we see Prestall set a legal precedent, when sued for debts, claiming he is not a full person with his treason charge still standing. We also see Prestall's decline. Traumatized by his time in the Tower he raves wildly with delusions

of grandeur and a paranoid belief that the Cecil and Elizabeth were conspiring against him. The chapter ends with Prestall mysteriously disappearing leaving those he conned and exiled still pursuing him.

Through examination of John Prestall, whose life straddles several branches of Elizabethan history, this thesis will add a new perspective to the study of Elizabethan Court politics exploring the influence of magic and opens a rich seam for further investigation. First and foremost however, this is the biography of John Prestall, a previously overlooked individual from Tudor England with a fascinating story of alchemy, conjuring, conspiracy and Court politics.

CHAPTER ONE

Prestall Family's Origins

To understand John Prestall we must first look back two generations. The Prestall family's upward social mobility into the gentry of the early sixteenth century is important in understanding the origin of John Prestall's life in the murky underworld of Elizabethan politics. Although John Prestall was born a gentleman, his grandfather, Elias Prestall was born a yeoman and ascended the rank of husbandmen into the gentry through service to a nobleman, marriage and wealth accumulation. It is this social rank climbing that we need to appreciate in order to understand John Prestall's aggressive and ruthless self interest. Investigating Prestall's family background also disproves a claim he made in 1591 when he announced that he was a blood relation to the Poles, a Sussex upper gentry family, who had lived in Sussex for several generations and descended from King Edward IV's brother the Duke of Clarence, so had a weak claim to the English throne through their Plantagenet blood.

The Prestall family's rise in two generations from Elias' arrival in Sussex as a yeoman to his son Thomas' eligibility for a knighthood in 1547, as an esquire, is a fascinating story and sets John Prestall on his life of magic conspiracies. Very few academic historians have looked at specific families over several generations in the early modern period. The most notable exception is the Paston family of Norfolk, who like the Prestall's experienced social elevation over several generations, starting as husbandmen in 1422 and ending as landed gentry calling Caistor Castle home in 1509.¹

¹ The Paston family is so accessible to historians because of the wealth of their private letters and documents that have survived. The Paston letters are believed to be the earliest surviving private correspondence to be written in English and as they have been compiled together in the British Library and Bodleian Library, Oxford, historians have the family's two way correspondence to neatly piece together

The fortunes of the Prestall family in the early 1500s reflects the great changes that occurred in English society with the development of a land market and the expansion of the gentry, elevating families like the Prestalls into the lesser gentry. To date no academic histories dedicated to the study of individual families in the period of Henry VIII's reign exist. The Paston letters fall just short, ending on 30 May 1510 with the will of John Paston the third and the gentry controversy debates focused on the gentry's rise or fall between 1558 and 1642, leaving the position of specific gentry families in the early sixteenth century overlooked by most historians. The major research on the first fifty years of the Tudor century is the quantitative research done by Julian Cornwall. Cornwall compiled musters and other government records, such as the Sussex Subsidy records for 1524-1525 published in 1956, to conduct a broad study of the gentry, who Cornwall called 'the silent majority' of the Tudor Age.²

No individual early sixteenth century gentry families has received any in-depth analysis from historians, although a wealth of source material is waiting to be researched in chancery records and county registers. In the case of the Prestall family, Cornwall's quantitative work mentions Elias Prestall, John Prestall's grandfather, once amongst the flock of Tudor county gents he examines.³ The most comprehensive source on the Prestall family is the five paragraph parliamentary biography of John Prestall's father, Thomas Prestall, by R.J.W. Swales in *History of Parliament: The Commons, 1509-1558*

the Paston's lives and world. Norman Davis collated a new edition of the Paston letters into three volumes making the Pastons more accessible as has Colin Richmond's multi-volume Paston family history. Norman Davis (ed.), *Paston Letters And Papers Of The Fifteenth Century*, 3 Vols., Oxford, 1971-1976; Colin Richmond, *The Paston Family In The Fifteenth Century*, 3 Vols., Cambridge, 1990-2005.

² Julian Cornwall's work includes: *Wealth and Society in Early Sixteenth Century England*, London, 1988; *Revolt of the Peasantry, 1549*, London, 1977; 'The Early Tudor Gentry', *The Economic History Review*, New Series, Vol. 17, no.3, 1965, pp.456-475; 'The Expansion of the Sussex Gentry 1525-1600', *Sussex Family Historian*, Vol. 5, no. 2, 1982, pp.76-100; and he edited the Sussex Record Society's *The Lay Subsidy Rolls for the County of Sussex 1524-1525*, Vol. LVI, Lewes, 1956.

³ Julian Cornwall, 'The Early Tudor Gentry', p.467.

(1982).⁴ Swales briefly sketches Thomas' life and his wider family, concentrating on outlining his parliamentary career and legal difficulties.

John Prestall's grandfather and father carved out a comfortable gentry life for themselves and their family in Sussex. Elias, as a servant and client of the Earl of Arundel benefited from the patron-client system, receiving rewards of land and commission positions that consolidated his gentry position. His son Thomas followed his father as a servant of the Earl of Arundel, further bolstering his social gains. However the Prestall family's rising position and wealth accumulation provided antagonism amongst local rivals. That antagonism entangled Thomas in legal challenges that sent him to his grave and consumed his widow, Margaret's life after his death. As soon as Thomas and Margaret died John Prestall inherited all his parent's lands, and immediately sold them ostensibly to clear his debts, before Margaret's will had even been proved.

The Prestall family arrived in Sussex from Northern England in the reign of King Henry VII. Originally from Lancashire, their name derived from the village of Prestall, in the parish of Deane in the Hundred of Salford, Lancashire just across the river from Manchester.⁵ Prestall was later subsumed by Bolton's industrial sprawl, leaving only a Prestall Lane and Presto Garden to mark the village site.⁶ Various branches of the Prestall family spread across the Hundred of Salford during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

⁴ HoP *Commons*, 1509-1558, III, p.150.

⁵ P. H. Reaney and R. M. Wilson, *A Dictionary of English Surnames*, London, 1951, 3rd edition, 1991, p.361. The actual word Prestall derives from the old-English 'prest-halh' describing a priests house or priest hall and can be dated back to the ninth century. The Surname Prestall is very rare and can be spelt numerous ways including Prestol, Prescall, Prestale, Prestel, Presnall, and Pressnell.

⁶ Reaney and Wilson, *A Dictionary of English Surnames*, p.351.

John Prestall's grandfather, Elias, and his two brothers, Edward and Nicholas, migrated to Sussex together. Edward and Nicholas settled at Ferring, in Worthing on the Sussex coast, while Elias moved to Poling, in the Rape of Arundel, three and a half kilometres south east of Arundel Castle. Their move cannot be dated, but a 1513 pardon roll described Edward Prestall as, 'of Ferring, Sussex, husbandman, alias late of Manchester, Lancashire, yeoman'.⁷ Elias and his brothers probably arrived in Sussex in the years before the birth of John Prestall's father Thomas around 1500.⁸

Thomas' mother is unknown. R.J.W. Swales suggests that Thomas' mother was Jane Brocas, though evidence now shows that Jane must have been Elias' second wife, since they married only in the first year of Henry VIII's reign. Jane had been previously married to one Thomas Purvocke, a gentleman, from Godalming, Surrey in 1507 and had a daughter, Johanna.⁹ Thomas Purvocke and their daughter Johanna both died two years later and were buried together at Godalming church on 27 September 1509.¹⁰ Shortly after her family tragedy, Jane and Elias married in either late 1509 or early 1510 when Thomas would have been either nine or ten years old. If Thomas was born after the marriage he would have been only seven in 1517 when he was sent to study law at the Inns of Court, if he was Jane Brocas' child.

Elias' marriage to Jane laid the foundation for his branch of the Prestall family's claims to gentry status. Unlike his brother, Edward, who experienced downward social

⁷ TNA C 67/61, Letters Patent for Pardons, 2-6 Hen VIII (1510 April – 1515 April), quoted in HoP *Commons*, 1509-1558, III, p.150.

⁸ Thomas' birth date is unknown. He does not give his age in his will, but extrapolating back from his admission to the Inner Temple in 1517, his birth was around 1500. Swales in his short biography for Thomas Prestall in the Parliamentary Biographies estimates 1503 using the same assumption. But if he was born in 1503 he would have been fourteen when he went to study law in London. This seems too young.

⁹ TNA C 1/436/26, Elice Prescall and Jane, his Wife, late the Wife of Thomas Purvoche, of Godalming, and Daughter and Heir of Richard Brocas, Gentlemen vs. Thomas Wodeward. Concerning the Detention of Plate, Jewels, Pewter, Brass, and 'housoldments,' Promised by the said Richard to Jane on her Marriage with Thomas, and of Deeds relating to Messuages and Land, part of the Manor of Estbury in East Compton, whereof Lady Anne Manners, Widow, was tenant, Surrey. (Undated, but probably from 1515).

¹⁰ Samuel Welman, *The Parish and Church of Godalming*, London, 1900, p.57.

mobility going from a yeoman down to the social rank of husbandman when he migrated to Sussex, Elias experienced momentous upwards social mobility.¹¹ Marriage to a gentleman's daughter and sole heiress, like Jane, provided the easiest route into the gentry.¹² Jane's parents, Richard and Jane Brocas, left Jane a substantial inheritance. In May 1495 Richard and Jane Brocas had been named in Cecily, Duchess of York's will. The Duchess left them

a long gown of purpull velvett upon velvet furred with ermyns, a greate Agnus of gold with the Trinite, Saint Erasmus, and the Salutacion of our Lady; an Agnus of gold with our Lady and Saint Barbara; a litell goblett with a cover silver and part guild; a pair of bedes of white amber gauded with vj. grete stones of gold, part aneled, with a pair of bedes of x. stones of gold and v. of corall; a cofor with a rounde lidde bonde with iron, which the said Jane hath in her keping, and all other thinges that she hath in charge of keping.¹³

Clearly Jane Brocas had been a trusted personal servant of the Duchess from a respected gentry family.

Elias' marriage to Jane gave him the material means for his social elevation, starting his property portfolio. In 1515, Elias and Jane took a case in Chancery against one Thomas Wodeward to retrieve lands at Estbury in Estcompton, Surrey, he had detained.¹⁴ Richard Brocas had promised Estbury to Jane when she married her first husband Thomas Purvocke. Estbury formed part of a larger dowry Richard Brocas promised she would receive when he died. This agreement had been between Richard Brocas and Thomas Purvocke's father, Thomas Purvocke, senior, and included silver plate, pewter implements, brass household implements and some other items from

¹¹ The division between yeoman and husbandman was permeable making the distinguishing of poor yeoman and wealthier husbandman difficult.

¹² Joyce Young, *The Pelican Social History of Britain: Sixteenth-Century England*, Harmondsworth, 1984, pp.116-117.

¹³ Quoted in John Gough Nichols and John Bruce, *A Selection from the Wills of Eminent Persons Proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury*, London, 2008, p.6.

¹⁴ TNA C 1/436/26, Elice Prescall and Jane, his Wife vs. Thomas Wodeward, c.1515.

bequests left to Jane's mother by the Duchess of York, to the value of £200.¹⁵ Richard Brocas died shortly after Jane's first husband, Thomas Purvocke junior. Thomas Wodeward took the opportunity of Richards death and argued he had title to the land at Estbury and took possession of it. No record of the Chancery case outcome survives but Elias evidently won the Chancery case, because he then began purchasing the land surrounding the Estbury tenements. A major part of these purchases occurred on 24 September 1518 when Edmund Manory, a yeoman from Asshe Surrey, transferred to Elias all his tenements and lands in the parish of Estcompton near Guilford for £2 through a fine register in Chancery.¹⁶

Due to the peculiarity of common law in early modern England, and its inability to recognise property transfers outside inheritance, Prestall and Manory had to collude in an action to transfer the land. In a commonly used process, Prestall accused Manory of 'trespassing' on his tenements, which Manory admitted and the court document produced recognised Prestall as the land's owner. Manory's meagre trespass fee was incorporated into the land price and each party involved held a copy of the court documentation. This complicated process was the cause of many disputes in the Court of Chancery, as John Prestall's father Thomas discovered. In the absence of modern land ownership registers the resulting documents, called Feet of Fines, although used to convey title, only mentioned who owned the land and the trespasser, meaning many parties could claim title to a single piece of land with multiple Feet of Fines records dating back over several generations.

Thomas Purvocke may, like Elias, also have been a client to the Earl of Arundel. It would have been rare for a gentry heiress to risk the social disparagement of marrying

¹⁵ TNA C1/436/26, Elice Prescall and Jane, his Wife, vs. Thomas Wodeward, c.1515.

¹⁶ H. R. Moulton, *Palaeography: Genealogy and Topography, Historical Documents—Ancient Chartes—Leases—Court Rolls—Pedigrees—Marriage Settlements—Fine Seals—Commissions—Papal—Bulls—Hand-Drawn Maps—and Autographs*, Richmond, 1930, p.270.

a smallholding husbandman like Elias Prestall, but if Purvocke had been an Arundel client the Earl could have intervened to arrange the marriage. It was not uncommon for patrons to look after the widows of their clients, setting them up for a comfortable life after the death of their husbands.¹⁷ Thus if Arundel had prompted the couple's marriage it would have shored up both Elias and Jane's social position, moving Elias as an Arundel client into the lesser gentry and providing a husband for Jane.

Elias further built up a portfolio of manors in and around Arundel, while residing at his home in Poling. He represented part of a new movement of landowners and property purchasers. Prior to 1500 the concept of a land market in England had been virtually non-existent due to a lack of supply, instead the predominant form of land transfer had been through inheritance.¹⁸ The lack of a property market resulted from a limited supply of available land but also problems with capital liquidity. This changed in the early sixteenth century, with the embryonic beginnings of land enclosure, which coincided with Elias' migration to Sussex, and then the land market expanded enormously with the dissolution of the monasteries in the time of his son Thomas, further accelerating the commodification of land. The most notable of Elias' landholdings in Sussex were leases received from Arundel College through the Earl's influence, particularly six hundred acres in Sullington and lands at Angmering. Both leasehold manors would later beset Thomas, swamping him in protracted Chancery litigation. In the 1530s and again in the 1540s several parties contested the validity of his leases, hoping to gain his titles, which forced him into protracted litigation.¹⁹

¹⁷ This is because 'any wealthy women, whether widow or unmarried heiress, was at grave risk of abduction in a society whose law gave her husband complete control of all her property, real and personal'. Youning, *Sixteenth-Century England*, p.125.

¹⁸ Youning, *Sixteenth Century England*, p.56.

¹⁹ TNA REQ 2/4/329, Robert Panet v. Thomas Prescall land in Angmering, Sussex, Date Unknown; TNA C 1/701/9, Christopher Elys, Late Sub-Master Of The College Of Arundel. v. Thomas Prestall, Gentleman, Receiver of the Rents Of The Said College, between 1532-1537.

The Earl of Arundel's influence is particularly important in explaining Elias' rise amongst the Sussex gentry. The Earls of Arundel possessed one of the oldest aristocratic titles in the realm, dating back to the Norman Conquest. Their extensive wealth and power derived from the vast tracts of family land centred on the town of Arundel and extended across Sussex and Surrey. Arundel's power and status in Sussex benefited his clients like Elias. As an Arundel client Elias' wealth increased through land grants and county offices, increasing his status in the community. Swales, in the Parliamentary biographies suggests that in gratitude Elias named his son Thomas after Thomas Fitzalan, the tenth Earl of Arundel.²⁰

As an Arundel client Elias gained his first commission as a Commissioner of Array for Sussex in February 1512.²¹ On the Commission of Array, Elias served with the local nobility, other gentlemen and military officers mustering and maintaining the fighting capability of the adult male population of Sussex, ensuring their readiness to serve the monarch when required. The role of Arrayer involved drilling against possible invasion. Few took the drilling seriously, and the county's leading Lords on the Commission of Array, delegated their responsibilities to men like Elias who may have had little military experience. Most of those on the commission of Array were also Justices of the Peace in their respective counties.²²

The Commission of Array acted as a political stepping stone for Elias. In 1514, he became a Sussex Subsidy Commissioner, responsible in Poling for collecting the subsidy or property tax recently approved by Parliament.²³ He did not appear as a Commissioner when the next Parliamentary subsidy was collected in 1524. Despite not

²⁰ HoP, *Commons*, 1509-1558, III, p.150.

²¹ *LP Henry VIII*, 1509-1514, p. 326, no. 3024, Sussex Commission of Array, 20 February 1512.

²² Steve Hindle, 'County Government in England', in Robert Tittler and Norman Jones (eds.), *A Companion to Tudor Britain*, Malden (MA), 2004, pp.104-107.

²³ SR, 1509-1545, p.169, 6 Hen. VIII, c.26: 'The Subsidye'.

being a Commissioner, the 1524 subsidy rolls assess him as Poling's largest property holder, with land worth £44 in Sussex.²⁴ Although we lack records for the 1524 Parliament, Julian Cornwall suggests that Elias, along with two other gentlemen from Sussex 'might have been members of the Parliament of 1523, and thereby disqualified from the Subsidy Commission'.²⁵ Elias' absence from the 1523 Subsidy Commission does not prove his election to the 1523 Parliament, but it seems likely given that he first appeared on the Sussex Commission of the Peace in April 1524. The disruption caused by Thomas Fitzalan's death and the succession of William Fitzalan, eleventh Earl of Arundel, in 1524, may also explain why no subsidy Commissioners seem to have been appointed in the Rape of Arundel in 1524.²⁶

Most Commissioners of Array were also Justices of the Peace, and after April 1524 Elias took the responsibility for keeping the King's Peace and dispensing summary justice in his Borough.²⁷ He would have tried misdemeanours and infractions of local bylaws and ordinances, and conducted arraignments before criminal cases. The Justice of the Peace was one of the most important figures in local government and represented the height of Elias's social rise. Although an unpaid magistrate, the position held considerable prestige, and made Elias a town burgess in Arundel, and thus an important figure in town government.²⁸

Elias exploited his political positions to further his social status, and Arundel's economic and geographic proximity to transport routes and markets in the early sixteenth century would have made it easier to develop both his social status and wealth. When Elias arrived in Arundel, the township located around the seat of the Earls of Arundel

²⁴ Cornwall, *Subsidy Rolls for the County of Sussex 1524-1525*, p.53.

²⁵ Cornwall, 'Early Tudor Gentry', p.467.

²⁶ HoP, *Commons*, 1509-1558, I, pp.200-201; HoP, *Commons*, 1509-1558, III, p.150.

²⁷ *LP Henry VIII*, 1524-30, p.124, no.18.

²⁸ HoP, *Commons*, 1509-1558, I, p.201.

was a pocket of economic activity in an otherwise economically backward Sussex. Arundel witnessed sustained economic growth though maintained a stable population in the early years of the sixteenth century.²⁹ Many other towns in Sussex suffered from limited transport infrastructure in the county, with the coastal ports declining and the roads usually impassable except during the driest summer months.³⁰ On the inland edge of the arable coastal belt in Sussex, Arundel provided access to the South Downs in Sussex's north. A market town straddling the Arun River with a stone bridge and riverbank port, Arundel was a nodal point for trade routes within the county.³¹ Despite its early sixteenth century growth, Arundel remained a midsize market town, overshadowed by the larger nearby towns of Chichester and Pulborough but still big enough for the chronicler William Harrison to note the town's annual December fair which attracted travellers.³² Still, the economic activity in Arundel and its surrounding area presented many opportunities for those who settled there, like Elias Prestall.

Elias intended his son to study Common Law at the Inns of Court in London, and on 27 June 1517 Thomas entered the Inner Temple.³³ In Henrician England landowning families commonly sent their eldest sons to one of the four Inns of Court to complete their social education and equip them with the legal knowledge necessary to defend their inheritances.³⁴ Given the expense of formal legal education it remained the preserve of the gentry and marks how far the Prestall family had come from their yeoman origins by 1517.

²⁹ Joseph H. Preston, *Arundel: A History of the Town and the Castle*, London, 1993, p.43.

³⁰ Roger B. Manning, *Religion and Society in Elizabethan Sussex: A Study of the Enforcement of the Religious Settlement*, Leicester, 1969, p.3.

³¹ Preston, *Arundel*, p.43.

³² William Harrison *The Description of England: The Classic Contemporary Account of Tudor Social Life*, Georges Edelen (ed.), Washington and New York, 1994, p.397.

³³ F. A. Inderwick (ed.), *Calendar of the Inner Temple*, Vol. I, London, 1896, p.40.

³⁴ Youings, *Sixteenth-Century England*, p.40.

While a student in 1519 Thomas served as Master of the Revels, responsible for the organisation of the Inner Temple's feasts and other entertainments for the following year.³⁵ Thomas continued to maintain a chamber in the Inner Temple after completing his studies, and may have held his chamber until his death in 1551.³⁶ During the 1520s and 1530s, Thomas practiced law, and he was nominated as Marshal and Butler of Inner Temple. However his business in Arundel and legal disputes over his land titles in Sussex and Surrey demanded his increasing attention and he had to decline accepting these positions. In January 1535 Thomas refused the Butlerage of the Inn and received a fine of £5; he also paid £5 in 1539 for declining the Marshalcy of the Inn.³⁷

When Thomas returned to Arundel, like his father before him, he served the Earl of Arundel. Early in 1524 Thomas married Margaret Ingler and their first child Joan was baptised later that year. When Thomas Fitzalan died on 24 October 1524, he remembered Elias on his deathbed, and both Elias and Thomas were retained by the new Earl, William Fitzalan.³⁸ Thomas soon took his father's place in Arundel's client network. There is no record of Elias death but he probably died shortly after Thomas Fitzalan as the last mention of him is in 1524.

After the succession of the new Earl there is a marked increase in the responsibilities Thomas Prestall received, which would have previously been exercised by his father. With the succession of the new Earl of Arundel, Thomas became Bailiff of the Rape of Arundel responsible for collecting fines and enforcing the Sheriff of Arundel's decisions. Thomas also took on an extra but lucrative responsibility, as Receiver-General for Arundel's Holy Trinity College in late 1528 or early 1529, he was

³⁵ Inderwick, *Calendar of the Inner Temple*, Vol. I, p.49.

³⁶ HoP, *Commons*, 1509-1558, III, p.150.

³⁷ Inderwick, *Calendar of the Inner Temple*, Vol. I, pp.108-109, 121.

³⁸ HoP, *Commons*, 1509-1558, III, p.150.

responsible for collecting rents on land the College had leased out.³⁹ As Receiver-General for Arundel College and Bailiff for the Rape of Arundel, Thomas held two positions that had the potential to make unpopular within the local community.

While Thomas was bailiff and serving in Arundel in 1527 Margaret gave birth to their son John, whose birth coincidentally marked a change in Thomas' fortunes.⁴⁰ Thomas' association with Arundel College would influence the rest of his life and thoroughly exercise his legal knowledge. His appointment as Receiver-General is most likely connected with William Fitzalan, Earl of Arundel's, long-held desire to appropriate the land and possessions of Arundel College by 'stacking' the College's administration with his closest clients who would act in his personal interests. The Earl of Arundel wanted to reclaim the College and Priory because his family forebears had established both institutions when they settled in the area Arundel College's land also played a part in Arundel's support for Henry VIII's divorce from Katherine of Aragon.⁴¹

In August 1529, Arundel's patronage ensured Thomas' election, along with one Richard Sackville, as members for Arundel in the Parliamentary session beginning in November 1529.⁴² No election records survive for the Parliaments of 1536, 1539, 1542 and 1545, but Henry VIII demanded all members of the 1529 'Reformation' Parliament be re-elected to the recalled Parliament in 1536.⁴³ So presumably Thomas sat in the 1536 Parliament and possibly the three subsequent Parliaments, as a reliable follower of the Earl of Arundel.

³⁹ HoP, *Commons*, 1509-1558, III, p.150.

⁴⁰ HoP, *Commons*, 1509-1558, III, p.150.

⁴¹ William Fitzalan was rewarded for his support of Henry and Anne Boleyn's marriage by being given the honour of bearing the Sceptre of the Dove at Anne Boleyn's coronation. Seeing the writing on the wall, he later took part in the prosecution, sitting with the other Peers at her trial on 15 May 1536.

⁴² TNA SP 15/6 f.7v, A List of Parliamentarians for Henry VIII's Parliament of 1529, 3 November 1529.

⁴³ HoP, *Commons*, 1509-1558, I, p.200-201. The Reformation Parliament is the nineteenth century name given to the 1529-36 Parliament.

There are no surviving records for Parliamentarians' attendance at Parliamentary sittings so it is not possible to know how often Thomas attended Westminster.⁴⁴ Many Commons members absented themselves, because the Borough they represented failed to pay sustenance for their services. Thomas Prestall and Richard Sackville, also a lawyer, may have similarly been absent from many Parliamentary sessions in 1530 and 1531 because they were busily suing each other. Sackville took Thomas to court to break his lease on Arundel College lands at Sullington.⁴⁵ The Master of Arundel College, Edward Hygons, went behind Thomas' back as Receiver-General, and leased to Sackville, himself a steward of the College, the same piece of land that Thomas had inherited the lease from Elias.⁴⁶ Hygons issued the second lease to Sackville on the understanding that he would invalidate Thomas' claim. A formidable legal adversary, Sackville had been anointed an 'ancient' of Gray's Inn in 1522, and two years later was named to sit on the Sussex Bench, a position he continued to hold until his death in 1546.⁴⁷ After a year of legal wrangling, the court decided in Thomas' favour, which forced Sackville to sell other lands to a local man, Thomas Devenish, to recoup his costs. Devenish quickly onsold the land Sackville had sold him to John Ledes, a local justice.

Thomas and Richard Sackville's legal battle concluded just before Parliament voted to pass the Act of Supremacy in 1534. However, with no surviving voting records we can only assume that Thomas and Sackville attended Parliament and voted as Arundel wanted.⁴⁸ The Act of Supremacy nationalised the Church in England with Henry VIII at its head, and outlined the provisions for the government to dissolve the

⁴⁴ There are only surviving attendance records for the Lords Temporal and Lords Spiritual, for the 1534 Parliament. Stanford E. Lehmborg, *The Reformation Parliament: 1529-1534*, Cambridge, 1970, pp.257-259.

⁴⁵ Lehmborg, *The Reformation Parliament*, p.36; HoP, *Commons*, 1509-1558, III, pp.150, 245-246.

⁴⁶ M. A. Tierney, *The History and Antiquities of the Castle and Town of Arundel From the Conquest to the Present Time*, Vol. II, London, 1834, pp.639-640. A list of the Masters of Arundel College can be found here.

⁴⁷ HoP, *Commons*, 1509-1558, III, p.246.

⁴⁸ Mark Turnham Elvins, *Arundel Priory, 1380-1980: The College of the Holy Trinity*, London, 1981, p.40.

smaller religious houses and orders. Arundel College was one such small religious institution, but for whatever reason in the initial round of closures it was overlooked and spared. Not deterred by this failure to secure the College Henry Fitzalan (at the time Lord Maltravers), the Earl of Arundel's son, wrote to Henry VIII in 1542 asking the King to grant the College and its associated hospital to his father and himself, in exchange for a gift of £1,000 and rent of £10 per annum.⁴⁹ William Fitzalan did not live to see the College returned to the Arundel Earldom. Henry Fitzalan succeeded his father as the twelfth Earl of Arundel on 23 January 1544.

On September 1544 Henry Fitzalan now the Earl of Arundel finally achieved his father's desire, when the last Master surrendered the College and all its lands and possessions to the King. Henry, on 23 December 1544 granted all the College's lands to the Arundels and their descendents in exchange his £1,000 gift.⁵⁰ Earl William had wanted Arundel College because his family had founded it, but Henry Fitzalan awash with debts, was far less sentimental. He had been more direct in his approach to Henry VIII, in 1542, looking to use the College lands to clear his debts.

After the Reformation Parliamentary session ended in 1536 Thomas Prestall needed all his legal knowledge because other local gentry challenged his land titles from Arundel College. Thomas' Chancery cases would consume most of his remaining life although details of them are sketchy. In 1541 the Earl of Arundel sided with Thomas in one of his Chancery cases. He bribed John Hygons, Master of Arundel College, to have him recognise Thomas' deeds over a long series of rival leases, and to issue a new lease

⁴⁹ TNA SP 1/73 f.61r, Henry, Lord Maltravers, to Henry VIII, 28 September 1542; Elvins, *Arundel Priory*, p.40.

⁵⁰ *LP Henry VIII*, 1544ii, p.441, n.734.

to Thomas to override all other possible leases.⁵¹ The Earl's support for Thomas demonstrates how highly he valued his service, using his local influence to intervene in the law against his other clients.

After Henry Fitzalan replaced his father as the Earl of Arundel and obtained the College's lands, Thomas found himself hauled back into court. Between 1544 and 1547 he fought several legal challenges concurrently, against William Alye and Thomas Paye, for land at Stedham, and Thomas West, Lord de la Warr. Thomas' legal dispute with Lord de La Warr helped to make the others particularly protracted.⁵² De la Warr challenged Thomas' wardship of messuages and tenements in Billinghamurst, Boshom, Chichester, Pulborough, and Selsey, along with his manor at Houghton.⁵³ Lacking the assistance of the otherwise occupied Earl of Arundel, Thomas engaged the help of his friend William Cheyney who would become his son-in-law in 1548.⁵⁴ Thomas had turned to Cheyney in part because his seventeen year old son John was of no assistance. Thomas Prestall and Cheyney, eventually won all three court cases in 1547, facing down de la Warr's out of court attempts to discredit him.

During this period Thomas moved into the upper echelons of the gentry, from a simple gentleman to becoming an esquire when Arundel College closed and its lands became available.⁵⁵ As an esquire Thomas moved into the social rank above gentlemen. Thomas probably earned the title Esquire as an experienced lawyer and member of local government. However it is an important social marker for the family's rise because the

⁵¹ Tierney, *The History and Antiquities of the Castle and Town of Arundel*, p.666.

⁵² TNA C 4/48/80, Thomas Prestall v. William Alye: Answer, Date Unknown; TNA C 1/1313/72, Margaret, late Husband of Thomas Prestall of Poling, v. Thomas Paye, Date Unknown (between 1551-1553); TNA C1/1208/26-29 William Cheyney, Gentleman, Son and Heir of Thomas Cheyney, and Thomas Prestall, esquire, vs. Thomas West, Lord de la Warr: Bond Extorted by a Wrongful Claim to Wardship of the Manor of Houghton and Messuages and Lands there and in Bosham, Billinghamurst, Pulborough, Selsey, and Chichester, Sussex, 1544.

⁵³ TNA C 1/1208/26-29, Cheyney and Prestall vs. Lord de la Warr, 1544.

⁵⁴ TNA C 1/1208/26-29, Cheyney and Prestall vs. Lord de la Warr, 1544.

⁵⁵ TNA C 1/1208/26-29, Cheyney and Prestall vs. Lord de la Warr, 1544. This is the first time Thomas is referred to as 'Thomas Prestall esquire'.

title of esquire distinguishes Thomas as a man of status in Sussex. In February 1547 the Prestall family's status peaked when Thomas' name appeared on the County Sheriff's list of those who possessed property worth in excess of £40 and were thus entitled to purchase a knighthood, but had not applied to do so.⁵⁶ This was a money making scheme used by Protector Somerset because of the financially desperate situation of King Edward VI's government. Thomas seems to have preferred to pay the fine and not become a knight.⁵⁷ Then in 1549 John Ledes dragged him back to the Court of Chancery over his title to the same lands Richard Sackville had challenged in 1529.

John Ledes had married Richard Sackville's widow after his death in 1546, and at her insistence reopened the issue of Thomas Prestall's lease at Sullington.⁵⁸ Thomas spent the next three years successfully defending the legitimacy of his lease. In response Ledes, like Lord de la Warr, used a smear campaign to discredit Thomas' character requiring him to defend his character in public. Thomas' daughter Joan had married William Cheyney in 1548 and Thomas probably called upon Cheyney rather than John Prestall to help his litigation and defend his public image.⁵⁹ By the time Thomas defeated all his legal adversaries in 1551, the ordeal had left him a very ill man. He died only months after his final legal triumph over Ledes.

Knowing he was dying Thomas Prestall wrote his last will and testament at Houghton on 30 September 1551. The probate was granted on 4 December. Thomas died a relatively wealthy member of the gentry with considerable possessions, having

⁵⁶ TNA SP 10/2 fo.102r. Persons Certified by the Sheriffs to possess £40 or more yearly who have not compounded for their fines of Knighthood, February 1547.

⁵⁷ TNA PROB 11/34. Will of Thomas Prestall of Houghton, Sussex, 30 September 1551, Probated 4 December 1551. Thomas' will does not title him as a Sir.

⁵⁸ HoP, *Commons*, 1509-1558, III, p.246.

⁵⁹ George Sherwood (ed.), *The Pedigree Register*, Vol. III, London, 1916, p.303. William Cheyney married Joan Prestall in 1548 and as a wedding gift Thomas gave them a manor at Houghton.

lost none of his lands in the courts. In Thomas' will his wife, Margaret, received all his eight manors and all his possessions and chattels on the proviso that she not remarry. If she did remarry Thomas' 'cosyn Thomas Yngler', acting as executor, was to divide Thomas' family property between their two children John and Joan, the wife of William Cheyney.⁶⁰ Thomas had used his legal training extensively to safeguard his manors and leases, and therefore set aside money for John in 'his learnyng in one of the Inns of Courte or chancerie'.⁶¹ Thomas clearly hoped a legal education would serve his twenty-four year old son as well as it had served him in continuing to defend and develop his patrimony. John, however, never took up his father's endowment for a legal education.

Though Thomas had sat in the Reformation Parliament and in all likelihood voted for the break with Rome and the suppression of Church property he remained Catholic until the day he died, as would his wife Margaret. Thomas' last will and testament followed proper legal form in recognising King Edward VI as 'by the grace of god kinge of England ffrance and Ireland defendor of the faith and in earthe of the churche of England and also of Ireland the Supreme head', but then as a good Catholic Thomas bequeathed his soul to 'almightie god my maker and redeemer / and to his blessed mother our ladye saynt Marye the virgyn'.⁶² This is a statement very out of step with the State Protestant faith of Edward VI and reminds us of the complex religious situation in England at the time, as we will continue to see with John Prestall.

Despite recent legal troubles when Thomas died the Prestall family appears to have been financially comfortable. Thomas left Margaret and his two children a considerable legacy of chattels and lands. To any outside observer the Prestall family's rise may have decelerated with Thomas' death but gave no sign of reversing in

⁶⁰ TNA PROB 11/34, Will of Thomas Prestall, 30 September 1551.

⁶¹ TNA PROB 11/34, Will of Thomas Prestall 30 September 1551.

⁶² TNA PROB 11/34, Will of Thomas Prestall 30 September 1551.

September 1551. However, Thomas' numerous legal duels had been so protracted and bitter in the 1540s that as soon as he died his enemies began circling like vultures around Margaret's bequest. Swales in his short Parliamentary biography of Thomas suggested that it was through Chancery suits that Margaret lost much of the family property.⁶³ Indeed Margaret's Chancery cases against Thomas Lock became particularly bitter ending up in the Court of Star Chamber when Lock sent men to seize horses from her land in 1553.⁶⁴ However Swales is incorrect. These Chancery cases must have gone in Margaret's favour because the Prestall family's wealth and status remained for John Prestall to squander them in the following years.

Margaret never remarried and until her death in 1554 lived at Houghton with Joan and William Cheyney in the manor Thomas had given them as a wedding gift.⁶⁵ Margaret's probate was registered on 6 January 1555, but she may have died during the spring of 1554.⁶⁶ Margaret's will, like her husband's, demonstrated her Catholic faith, asking for alms to be distributed to the poor at the prayers said for her soul at her month's mind.⁶⁷ Margaret also requested to be buried in the parish church in Houghton presumably next to Thomas.⁶⁸ Before his mother's will had been proved, John sold Prestall family lands in 1554. He did so because, now twenty-seven, he had obviously ignored his father's path to prosperity by not studying law at the Inner Temple. Instead he had remained in Sussex where he had run up vast debts through a spendthrift lifestyle, which would leave him perennially in debt for the rest of his life.

Prestall's considerable debts in 1554 swallowed his inheritance. During Easter term, 1554 Prestall conveyed the titles for all his properties to Humphrey Bentley, a

⁶³ HoP, *Commons*, 1509-1558, III, p.150.

⁶⁴ STAC 3/4/76, Margaret Prescall vs. Thomas Pay, Nicholas Aslet, and others, 1553.

⁶⁵ R. Garraway Rice and Walter H. Godfrey (eds.), *Transcript of Sussex Wills: Vol III. Horsted Keynes to Pyecombe*, Lewes, 1938, p.11.

⁶⁶ Rice and Godfrey, *Transcript of Sussex Wills: Vol III*, p.9.

⁶⁷ Rice and Godfrey, *Transcript of Sussex Wills: Vol III*, p.11.

⁶⁸ Rice and Godfrey, *Transcript of Sussex Wills: Vol III*, p.11.

gentleman, through the Feet of Fines.⁶⁹ He then, like his mother, probably lived in Houghton with his sister Joan and brother-in-law William Cheyney. The properties he sold included his house, Marringdean Manor, as well as his Sussex tenements in Billingshurst, Codham, Alyngbourne, Potteberyes, Minstead, those at Houghton not owned by his sister Joan, and further tenements in Southampton.

Prestall had liquidated everything he had inherited from his grandfather and father's two generations of accumulated wealth, but even this did not satisfy his creditors. In 1555, with his accruing debts ballooning, Prestall 'was outlawed foor certen of moneye w^{ch} he owet to a gent[leman] in th[e] cuntry and th^t the mayor of Chichester had a writt to arreste him'.⁷⁰ Searching for a way to eliminate his debts John Prestall sought desperate measures and displayed a complete disregard for both political security and law to regain his wealth. As we will see in the next chapter from 1556 Prestall involved himself in a series of conspiracies to change the royal succession, hoping by doing so to win rewards from the incoming monarch. Throughout his life he would demonstrate an uncompromising ruthless self-interest that he had inherited and learnt from his family's social ascent and legal troubles. In pursuit of his own self-interest he applied contemporary occult philosophy to politics, particularly his alchemical knowledge, which may have been the original cause of his enormous debts. In the next three chapters we will address how Prestall used his cunning in politics. However, to understand Prestall's true character we need to look at his marriage in 1559, and his devious behaviour to clear his debts at the expense of his stepson, Henry Owen. This is a harbinger for the rest of Prestall's life.

⁶⁹ Edwin H.W. Dunkin, *Sussex Manors, Advowsons, etc., Recorded in the Feet of Fines, Henry VIII. to William IV. (1509-1833)*, Vol, 2, London, 1915, p.292.

⁷⁰ TNA SP 11/8 f.14r, Deposition of Roger Horton, taken before John Throckmorton, Greenwich, 13 April 1556.

In Surrey in late 1559 Prestall married Isabell Catesby, a widow, and proceeded unscrupulously to exploit the estate of her son Henry Owen, a minor. Isabell's husband, John Owen, a Surrey gentleman, died on 15 April 1559, leaving their twelve year old son, Henry, a considerable estate and chattels. Prestall had known John Owen before he died and jumped at the opportunity his death presented. Prestall owed the Owens 2,000 marks (£1332) and Prestall's dubious associate, John Elliot, had bought the Manor of Weston Corbett in Hampshire from John Owen in 1558. Prestall married Owen's widow, Isabell, as a means to clear his debts to the Owens. According to Henry Owen's allegations forty years later Prestall was 'also verye muche indebted unto dyu[er]se other p[er]sons, by reasyon of his lewde behavio^t, whereappon lately he was atteynted. viz. of Treason'.⁷¹ Though Henry Owen confused Prestall's arrest in 1558, discussed in the next chapter, with his later arrests for treason, he rightly pointed out that as his stepfather Prestall 'entered as guardian in socage of Hynry's lands for five years worth 400 marks [£266] per annum' which he set about using to 'dysburden him selfe' of his debts, liquidating as many of Henry Owen's assets as quickly as he could.⁷²

Using extortion, subterfuge and threats Prestall ransacked his stepson's inheritance to pay some of his debts, and transferred others to Henry Owen. He called his creditors down from London and convinced them that lending him more money would not be throwing good money after bad. Although he could not pay them what he owed presently, he now had Owen's inheritance to serve as new security. The agreement they reached meant that Prestall and his creditors would 'Ioynatelye be bounde wth Owyn' but 'none shoulde be sewed or discharged but Owyn'.⁷³ The agreement left the underage Owen with Prestall's debts when he later abandoned them. In a complicated financial

⁷¹ BL Lansdowne MS 87 f.99v, A Declaration of the Manner of John Prestall's Entrapping Henry Owen in certain bonds, 1598. This treason refers to Prestall's astrology in November 1558 (See Chapter Two).

⁷² TNA C 3/135/18, Henry Owen's Deposition against John Prestall, Case Date Unknown.

⁷³ BL MS Lansdowne 87 f.99v, John Prestall's Entrapping Henry Owen, 1598.

scam Prestall also redeemed bonds that Owen's father had made against lands worth £1,000, but forfeited the bonds, which he promised to return to Owen with land he had redeemed, in return for one third of Owen's lands. Prestall then offered a general release from another bond of £200, which if Owen had refused Prestall threatened to take one-third of his land and extend a legal claim over the final third. The young Owen, taken in by this 'craftie dissembling and cosenyng' of his stepfather, agreed to a recognizance with one of Prestall's creditors, Richard Bytinson, for sure payment of £200 for Prestall's debts.⁷⁴ The agreement exempted Bytinson from any repercussions if the recognizance remained unpaid, because of a secret previous agreement with Prestall. This agreement with Owen relied on Prestall's verbal promise to keep his side of the agreement, which according to Owen left him saddled with Prestall's debts.⁷⁵

Prestall, while financially weighing Owen down with his old and new debts, pressed his stepson to advance him more money, offering a quick way to discharge all his debts in exchange. Prestall claimed that if Owen gave him more money he would 'opteyn a lycence for to make goulde of oy^{er} mettall (w^{ch} I can doo) as ys well knowen, and y^{ou} in clere gaynes I wyll geve yo^u also one thouzande poundes' profit above the amount required to clear his debts.⁷⁶ Threatening to make a claim on the rest of Owen's property if he did not co-operate Prestall organised another two recognizances; one between himself and John Elliot and the other between himself and an Edulfe Elliot which Owen signed 'being led with this fable' of alchemical promises. This agreement was later recorded in the Chancery records, though Prestall never enrolled either of them on the official debt register.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ TNA C 3/135/18, Owen's Deposition against Prestall, Date unknown.

⁷⁵ TNA C 3/135/18, Owen's Deposition against Prestall, Date unknown; BL Lansdowne MS 87 f.99v-101r, John Prestall's Entrapping Henry Owen, 1598.

⁷⁶ BL MS Lansdowne 87 f.99v, John Prestall's Entrapping Henry Owen, 1598.

⁷⁷ TNA C 3/135/18, Owen's Deposition against Prestall, Date unknown.

While relieving himself of his debts at Owen's expense, Prestall sought to maximise Owen's revenue for himself, which included taking what he thought should have belonged to Owen from the his neighbours. In 1561 Prestall laid a complaint in the Court of Star Chamber against a group of seventeen 'ryotus and rebellious parsons' who lived in and around Wotton, claiming they had used violence to enter Wotton Wood to seize the goshawks that nested in the area every year.⁷⁸ Trained goshawks were valuable gifts, frequently exchanged between clients and patrons in the nobility and gentry. In years past, Henry's father, Sir John Owen, had come to a mutual understanding with his neighbours that the hawks were a common property as they nested on a common piece of 'wast ground'.⁷⁹ Prestall now claimed they nested not on common ground but in Wotton Wood, which belonged to Wotton Manor, part of Owen's inheritance. Prestall employed three keepers, claiming they were to 'looke to the safekeping and preseruacon of the said hawke and ayry', installing them in a cabin near the base of the tree containing the hawk's eyrie.⁸⁰

Thomas Elrington from the nearby manor of Abingeworthe wanted to use the hawks for breeding, as he and others in the community had done before Prestall's arrival at Wotton.⁸¹ According to Prestall's Star Chamber complaint, which needed to allege 'riotous assembly' to bring the case within the Star Chamber's jurisdiction, at midnight on 22 April Elrington and sixteen others entered the wood to seize the hawks

arrayed in jackes Corsetoffes shirtes of male and other warlycke Armor and weapnyed w^t Crossbowes Handgunns longe Bowes Bylles swordes Binklers daggeres axcies and hatchettes and also bearyng and brynging w^t them bailles of

⁷⁸ TNA STAC 5/P65/12, Prestoll v. Baseley, Elrington and Others, 1561.

⁷⁹ TNA STAC 5/P65/12, Prestoll v. Baseley, Elrington and Others, 1561.

⁸⁰ TNA STAC 5/P28/27, Prestall v. Elryngton & others, 1561; TNA STAC 5/P65/12, Prestoll v. Baseley, Elrington and Others, 1561.

⁸¹ TNA STAC 5/P65/12, Prestoll v. Baseley, Elrington and Others, 1561.

wyldfyre and squibbes wyth too waygons furshed wth bordes and hai for the defence of gonne shotte yf any resystance sholde happen.⁸²

Congregating outside the keeper's cabin the group's presence, according to Prestall, forced the keepers to flee, fearing they would be 'slayne and murdered or els so mangled and maymed as they shoulde not have ben able at any tyme here after to have done any servyce to ther sayd master'.⁸³ Elrington replied to Prestall's Star Chamber Bill by declaring that the goshawks were not in Wotton Wood but on land called Manwood Common, and declared he went to the wood armed with weapons for his own, and his company's, protection. The last thing they intended was 'evyll wordes force or vyolence'.⁸⁴ However, when they arrived at the cabin, Elrington declared, the keeper fired on them with guns and arrows. The keepers noted Elrington's company had acted riotously.⁸⁵

It is impossible to determine who started the fracas in the woods, but the result was loss for the entire community, because the annual breeding of the hawks ceased. During the confusion as wildfire, fireworks and other projectiles filled the air, someone felled the tree containing the eyrie, leaving each side blamed the other. Prestall's deposition states that the felling, caused the hawk to take flight and smashed the unhatched eggs. According to Prestall this resulted in 'not only the lose of the sayd Ayrye of hawkes this present yeare But also for ever her[e] after for that the sayd hawke beynge so craelly delte wyth all will never hereafter breade wyth in the sayd Wood to the greate losse and displeasure of your highnes sayd pore subiecte'.⁸⁶ Prestall conveniently overlooked the fact that if he had not tried to monopolise the hawks they would not have been lost to himself and the community.

⁸² TNA STAC 5/P65/12, Prestoll v. Baseley, Elrington and Others, 1561.

⁸³ TNA STAC 5/P65/12, Prestoll v. Baseley, Elrington and Others, 1561.

⁸⁴ TNA STAC 5/P65/12, Prestoll v. Baseley, Elrington and Others, 1561.

⁸⁵ TNA STAC 5/P65/12, Prestoll v. Baseley, Elrington and Others, 1561.

⁸⁶ TNA STAC 5/P65/12, Prestoll v. Baseley, Elrington and Others, 1561.

Before abandoning his wife Isabell and Henry Owen in 1562, Prestall, Elliot and one Crowder conned poor Owen into signing more recognizances, which Prestall would retain. Prestall demanded that Owen give him £300, by the forced sale of lands worth £10 per annum, which ‘he woulde sende y^e same into fflanders to by, mechandyce; y^e w^{ch} he woulde cause to be returned over wth great gaynes’.⁸⁷ As we shall see, this money Prestall sent to the Netherlands to fund his 1562 conspiracy against Elizabeth I. Prestall also made ‘very earnest, lewd and devilish persuasions’ pressuring Owen to sell more of his remaining lands to the value of £2,000.⁸⁸ Once this money became available Prestall accused Owen of planning to kill his future wife, Elizabeth, thus creating a diversion sufficient to allow Prestall to make his escape taking the £2,000 and leaving Owen debt laden.⁸⁹ Prestall would use wild accusations against enemies on future occasions when he wanted to distract attention.

Prestall’s family background was set within an aggressive society that shaped his development. His father, a Catholic, had no compunction about dissolving the Catholic religious houses while in Parliament and then profited from the land sale. As a result Prestall, driven by debt, was unscrupulous with others’ money and resources. His looting of Henry Owen’s lands and transferring debt to Owen’s name shows absolute self-interest at the cost of others. It shows a man willing to use his occult knowledge to pursue self-interest and not indisposed to exaggerated claims of his own abilities while unabashed accusing others of the outrageous behaviour he himself displayed. These are all characteristics we see again and again in Prestall’s activities, starting with his first conspiratorial scheming in the 1556 Dudley conspiracy.

⁸⁷ BL Lansdowne MS 87 f.101r, John Prestall's Entrapping Henry Owen, 1598; TNA C 3/135/18, Owen's Deposition against Prestall, Date unknown.

⁸⁸ TNA C 3/135/18, Owen's Deposition against Prestall, Date unknown.

⁸⁹ TNA C 3/135/18, Owen's Deposition against Prestall, Date unknown.

CHAPTER TWO

1560s: Conjuring Conspiracy

Insights into John Prestall's character, revealed by his looting of his step son, Henry Owen's estate, can also be seen in his involvement in politics. Now we need to follow his involvement in magic plots against Mary I and Elizabeth I because those events show his continuing involvement in desperate attempts to restore his crumbling finances. He married Isabell Catesby not just to repair his long standing financial problems, but as we shall see, in response to the failure of his first occult plot against Elizabeth in the very first days of her reign.

The question of royal succession haunted both Tudor Queens. This chapter examines Prestall's previously uncharted involvement in the issue of royal succession: first in the Dudley conspiracy against Mary I in 1556 and then in conspiracies against Elizabeth I in the 1560s. It is through his conspiring against Elizabeth I that we see his use of magic take a central role in his skill set offered to conspirators and patrons. John Prestall's use of magic in political conspiracies and the anxiety it caused the Elizabethan regime demonstrate that magic made an important contribution to political intrigues of the 1560s succession crisis which have received only superficial study by historians.

After Prestall sold his inherited family lands in 1554 and while still mired in debt with a warrant out for his arrest as a debtor, he partook in political opportunism collaborating in the Dudley conspiracy in 1556. Prestall's implication in the Dudley conspiracy came when his servant Roger Horton was captured on 9 April by Sir Henry Hussey, in West Itchenor, Sussex and sent for examination by the Privy Council on 13

April.¹ Horton's deposition, taken at Greenwich, records Prestall's attempt to leave England after the collapse of the conspiracy in spring 1556. Horton entered Prestall's service on 11 February 1556, though his deposition is vague about Prestall's actual involvement in the plot. However, Horton's statement does connect Prestall with Sir Geoffrey Pole and Edward Lewknor, both conspirators in the Dudley plot who were still at large when Horton's deposition was taken.

The historiography of the Dudley conspiracy centres around David Loades major work on the subject *Two Tudor Conspiracies* (1965), which completely overlooks Prestall and Horton's deposition.² This is hardly surprising because Prestall at that time was relatively unknown, and was not caught and interrogated. But Roger Horton's deposition both links Prestall to the conspiracy and is the only document that identifies Sir Geoffrey Pole as one of the plots conspirators before his detention.³ This puts considerable weight on this manuscript because Geoffrey Pole's role in the Dudley conspiracy remains unclear. Historians only know that he was caught and identified as a conspirator, placed in the Tower and then released through the influence of Cardinal Reginald Pole, his brother.⁴

The Dudley Conspiracy of 1556 derived its name from Sir Henry Dudley, the conspiracy's initiator and distant cousin of John Dudley, Duke of Northumberland, who had been executed for trying to deprive Mary I the English throne by enthroning Lady

¹ TNA SP 11/8 ff.14v-15r, The Deposition of Roger Horton, 13 April 1556.

² David Loades, *Two Tudor Conspiracies*, Cambridge, 1965.

³ Very few historians have acknowledged Geoffrey Pole's involvement in the Dudley conspiracy. David Loades makes no mention of him and Pole's HoP *Commons* biography entry states that no record of Pole exists between September 1553 and his death in November 1558. T. F. Mayer's ODNB entry for Pole is one of the few works that refers to his involvement in the Dudley conspiracy, but sums it up in a single sentence. HoP *Commons*, 1509-1558, III, pp.115-118; T. F. Mayer, 'Pole, Sir Geoffrey (d. 1558)', *ODNB*, 2008, [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/22447>].

⁴ 'Pole, Sir Geoffrey (d. 1558)', *ODNB*.

Jane Gray as Queen of England in 1553. The Dudley conspirators intended to depose Mary I and her husband King Philip II of Spain and place Mary's half sister, the Protestant Lady Elizabeth, on the English throne. This would free England from the perceived Spanish influence and the threat of Spanish domination, while also returning England to Protestantism. In the summer of 1555 Mary had failed to produce an heir after her first of her two phantom 'pregnancies', and from then onwards was beset by poor health. The conspirators feared Philip's intentions for England should Mary die without an heir. They anticipated he would try to incorporate England into his Habsburg Spanish Empire.

The autumn of 1555 saw the culmination of several years of harvest failures that forced people into London looking for work. Rumours of conspiracies swirled around the city streets before Parliament sat in October of that year. Earlier in July, when most gentlemen had left London to escape the oppressive heat and stench for their estates in the country, the Privy Council ordered a group of gentry who had remained in the city, meeting in St Pauls, to cease their activities and disperse, which only added to the sense of tension in the political climate. Historians see this group as the origin of the Dudley Conspiracy. The Spanish ambassador, Renard, identified the group as 'relatives and partisans of the Lady Elizabeth', and the Venetian ambassador Michieli wrote to the Doge and Senate that the group consisted of members of the Dudley family.⁵ Little else is known of this group as their plans did not take any substantial form until the close of Parliament in early December.

The conspirators intended to use a mercenary army, led by 200 English exiles in France and equipped with the latest French firearms, to invade England through Milford

⁵ *CSP Spanish*, 1554-1558, pp.227-230, n.220, Simon Renard to the Emperor, 10 July 1555; *CSP Venetian*, 1555-1556, pp.136-138, n.161, Giovanni Michiel, Venetian Ambassador in England, to the Doge and Senate, 15 July 1555.

Haven in Wales, while a simultaneous revolt was planned for the West Country. The conspirators co-opted Richard Uvedale, the Captain of Yarmouth Castle on the Isle of Wight, who would let the invading army enter without raising the alarm. The conspiracy hinged on the ability of the conspirators to raise funds to purchase weaponry and the services of mercenaries. The conspirators initially approached King Henry II of France. He was at war with Spain and initially keen to subvert the situation in England to divert Spanish resources away from the French-Spanish fronts. Yet he balked at supplying the conspirators with his own men and weaponry, especially after he began peace negotiations with Philip at Vaucelles in January 1556. However, Henry was willing to sell the conspirators supplies for their invasion. Henry had a complicated response to the conspirators because he possessed his own claimant to the English throne in the person of the young Lady Mary Stuart of Scotland (the future Mary, Queen of Scots) who had grown up at the French Court and was betrothed to Henry's son Francis, Dauphine of France. He would much prefer to have seen his young Mary Stuart replace Mary I than Elizabeth but at the same time Henry would not pass up the opportunity to destabilise England if he could do so without direct involvement and at minimum cost.

Without French funding to buy French weapons, the plotters hatched a plan to steal £50,000 of Spanish silver from the Exchequer and spirit it away to France.⁶ There the bullion would be minted into counterfeit English currency at the recently established English exile mint operating at Dieppe. The conspirators, using subterfuge, made a copy of a key belonging to Nicholas Brigham, the Teller of the Exchequers. Then one of the conspirators, Thomas White, got cold feet and revealed everything to Cardinal Reginald Pole during confession. Pole informed the Privy Council and in March 1556 those involved were arrested and interrogated, revealing the names of more conspirators.

⁶ David Loades, *Intrigue and Treason: The Tudor Court, 1547-1558*, New York, 2004, p.234.

Many of the conspirators involved resembled Prestall, ‘men down on their luck and prepared to take risks to restore their fortunes’.⁷ Prestall’s exact role is unclear because Roger Horton’s deposition merely mentions the other conspirators with whom Prestall associated. However, this became Prestall’s future *modus operandi*: participate in conspiracies in the hope of receiving rewards from the new regime that would clear his debts. Coining money also repeatedly attracted him. This explains Prestall’s involvement, as a Catholic, in a Protestant conspiracy against a Catholic monarch. Such ambiguous involvement was not unique to Prestall in the Dudley conspiracy. As David Loades states ‘the disaffected gentry are a shadowy bunch, not because we do not know who they were but because we do not know how deeply they were involved’.⁸

Horton’s deposition outlines how Prestall escaped from England in early 1556 to evade his debts. Prestall stayed at his sister Joan and William Cheyney’s manor of Houghton until 16 February, Shrove Tuesday, when he left Horton at Houghton and travelled to London, where he contacted a former servant, identified only as John.⁹ Several days after Prestall left Houghton Joan sent Horton to find him in London and collect several items she required. Prestall tarried in London, claiming he was only waiting to collect money owing to him.¹⁰ Returning to Sussex, Prestall went to Sir Geoffrey Pole’s manor at Lordington, Sussex, where he stayed for a night before travelling to Edward Lewknor’s manor at Kingston by Sea, Sussex.¹¹

Edward Lewknor had one of the more unusual stories of those who partook in the Dudley conspiracy. Lewknor was captured on the 6 June 1556, and was condemned to death on 15 June, but died in the Tower three months on 6 September before the date of

⁷ Penry Williams, *The Later Tudors: England 1547-1603*, Oxford, 1995, p108.

⁸ Loades, *Intrigue and Treason*, p.229.

⁹ TNA SP 11/8 f.14r, The Deposition of Roger Horton, 13 April 1556.

¹⁰ TNA SP 11/8 f.14r, The Deposition of Roger Horton, 13 April 1556.

¹¹ TNA SP 11/8 f.14v, The Deposition of Roger Horton, 13 April 1556.

his execution. Lewknor became entangled in the Dudley Conspiracy at the beginning of February 1556, when he and William West learned from one Henry Peckham of Dudley's plan. Peckham asked Lewknor to obtain a copy of Henry VIII's last will and testament to provide the plotters with evidence they hoped would prove that Henry had barred Queen Mary from the English throne. Unlike Prestall, Lewknor and his wife Dorothy were staunch Protestants and undoubtedly maintained contact with the Protestant English exiles in Europe through his brother-in-law Thomas Wroth, a dissident who had been driven into exile by the Marian regime.

More interesting than his actual role in the Dudley Conspiracy is what came to light, during interrogations, about Lewknor and a group of other conspirators involved in the Dudley conspiracy who had planned to assassinate Mary and Philip in November 1554. Peckham asked Lewknor to retrieve Henry VIII's will because Lewknor was groom-porter at Court under both Edward VI and Mary I.¹² In that office he supplied the monarch and the Court with playing cards, dice and other necessities for card games and gambling before Mary replaced him. Before his removal in November 1554, Lewknor had been crucial to the plan to kill Mary and Philip.¹³ The King and his Spanish courtiers organised a demonstration of *jeu de cannes* for the pleasure of Mary and the Court. Lewknor conspired with three men, known only as Alday, Williams, and one William Hunnis, a self-confessed alchemist, to kill Philip and Mary while attention was concentrated on the games.¹⁴ The plot failed largely because the English found the horseback *jeu de cannes* exhibition far less impressive than jousting, so that the games ended prematurely after two rounds instead of the intended three. Those involved lost their nerve. Hunnis along with his relative, Thomas White, were assigned to slay the monarchs, but could not bring themselves to perform the deed fearing 'that whosoever

¹² HoP *Commons*, 1509-1558, II, p.529.

¹³ D. M. Loades, *The Reign of Mary Tudor*, London, 1979, p.265.

¹⁴ TNA SP 11/7 f.87r, The Deposition of [William] Hunnis taken in the Tower, [March] 1556.

sholde kill her maiestie shoulde have bene put to deth for examples sake whosoever had byn king or quene after'.¹⁵ Despite claims that 300 people knew of the conspiracy no inkling of the plot or how close it came to implementation emerged until the same malcontents were arrested for involvement in the Dudley plot.¹⁶ Lewknor's participation in the assassination plan no doubt was part of the evidence presented against him at his trial on 15 June emmeshing it into his involvement in the Dudley conspiracy, escalating the apparent threat the Dudley plotters presented and ensuring his death sentence.

Prestall probably had nothing to do with the 1554 assassination plans. It is doubtful that he was one of the exaggerated 300 who allegedly knew of the plan. At the time Prestall would have been in Sussex actively piling up debt. The importance of this 1554 assassination story for Prestall is Lewknor's involvement and the men Prestall would have met through Lewknor. He would undoubtedly have met William Hunnis through Lewknor. As a Sussex gentleman He would have been part of a Sussex gentry network that would have provided contacts for him allowing him to meet people like Hunnis. Although speculative, it is possible Hunnis introduced Prestall to alchemy, because with no formal education there is no other explanation for where Prestall could have learnt the alchemical and astrological techniques necessary to make his process appear credible.

As an alchemist, Hunnis had been approached by a group of the Dudley conspirators, who unsuccessfully tried to persuade him to operate a counterfeiting mint at Dieppe in France. Although Hunnis did not go to Dieppe, others did, and the mint operated until August 1556, when the French shut it down as a concession to the English ambassador. Henry VIII had debased the coinage several times to pay for his French

¹⁵ TNA SP 11/7 f.89r, The Deposition of Thomas White, Concerning William Hunnis taken in the Tower, [March] 1556; E. Harris Harbison, *Rival Ambassadors at the Court of Queen Mary*, New York, 1940, reprinted 1970, p.198; Loades, *Two Tudor Conspiracies*, p.144. (Loades wrongly transcribes this quote).

¹⁶ Loades, *Two Tudor Conspiracies*, p.143.

wars, and counterfeiting coins had become an endemic problem during Mary's reign as inflation skyrocketed so shutting the Dieppe mint would have had little impact on controlling inflation.¹⁷ Prestall may have intended to cross the Channel to start coining in the Dieppe mint. He would several times use his coining skills to obtain patronage or get himself out of sticky situations. Coining would have assisted the conspirators but also would have allowed Prestall to pay off his debts with alchemically counterfeited coinage, using someone else's expensive equipment.

After spending several days at Lewknor's manor on the Sussex coast Prestall 'determined to go on into ffrance and by th^l meanes ~~he~~ his frendes might be better able to agree wth him'.¹⁸ Prestall's motive was ostensibly to escape the arrest warrant issued for his debts, and he commanded Horton not to tell 'anie man of his goinge over'.¹⁹ He left Lewknor's home on 4 April 1556, Easter Eve, when he returned to Pole's manor and made plans to escape overseas with the help of two men, Robert Arnold and William Gittens, who 'hired one Ludnam's boote by the said Prestall's appointment to go downe the Avon'.²⁰ On Easter Monday, the group ballasted the vessel and hired a mariner named Edge to sail them across the English Channel. The wind and tide proved contrary however, so Prestall and William Gittens returned to shore to try again when the wind served. That was the last time Horton saw Prestall. Horton accompanied Edge to West Itchenor, where they remained for two days waiting for Prestall until their capture and examination by Sir Henry Hussey. After Horton's examination on 13 April 1556 Prestall disappeared from the historical record until the first week of Elizabeth I's reign, when the Privy Council arrested him for practicing astrology against her. Despite the absence of evidence it seems that the rolling up of the Dudley Conspiracy and the closure of the

¹⁷ C. E. Challis, *The Tudor Coinage*, Manchester, 1978, p.291.

¹⁸ TNA SP 11/8 f.14v, The Deposition of Roger Horton, 13 April 1556.

¹⁹ TNA SP 11/8 f.14v, The Deposition of Roger Horton, 13 April 1556.

²⁰ TNA SP 11/8 f.14v, The Deposition of Roger Horton, 13 April 1556.

Dieppe mint in the summer of 1556 prevented Prestall using those means to clear his debts.

Prestall resurfaces in 1558 participating in a series of conspiracies against Elizabeth I that as a result increased the Elizabethan government's desire to clamp down on opposition, especially that originating from Catholic dissenters to Elizabeth's rule, while still accommodating the Catholic beliefs of the majority of the English population. One result of this reaction was the Witchcraft Act of 1563 primarily focused on what Sir William Cecil regarded as Catholic superstitious conjuring. Norman Jones has attributed the passing of the 1563 Witchcraft Act to the Waldegrave Affair of 1561.²¹ Jones conflates the Waldegrave Affair and Prestall's 1562 conspiracy, that Cecil claimed to have uncovered. Jones presents the trial of the group from the 1562 conspiracy as part of the Waldegrave Affair summing it up in a single paragraph, not naming Prestall, instead identifying him as 'a conjurer'.²²

Mary I died on 17 November 1558, leaving England wracked by religious ferment, financially unstable and at war with France. The proclamation announcing Elizabeth I's accession sparked rowdy jubilation on the streets of London. Henry Machyn, a London merchant, recorded in his diary that 'all the chyrches in London dyd ryng, and at nyght dyd make bonefyres and set tabulls in the strett and ded ett and drynke and mad mere for the newe quen Elizabeth quen Mare[']s] syster'.²³ However, not everyone welcomed the twenty-five year old Protestant monarch, Elizabeth I. As part of the conflict, the French Catholic seer Michel Nostradamus predicted enigmatically

²¹ Jones, 'Defining Superstitions', pp.187-203 and Norman Jones, *The Birth of the Elizabethan Age*, pp.36-38.

²² Jones, 'Defining Superstitions', p.192.

²³ Henry Machyn, *The Diary of Henry Machyn, Citizen and Merchant-Taylor of London, from AD 1550 to AD 1563*, John Gough Nicholas (ed.), London, 1848, p.178.

imminent catastrophe for Protestant England. English Catholics, facing the loss of the old religion, responded with similar prophecies. Initially the new regime took these home-grown utterances more seriously than those from across the English Channel. The Privy Council responded to this astrological backlash to Elizabeth's accession by ordering Sir John Mason and Henry Manners, the Earl of Rutland, to investigate the possibility of Catholic conjuring in and around London, together with the affairs of Mary I's Cardinal, Reginald Pole, who died only hours after Mary.²⁴

On 22 November 1558, Mason and Rutland arrested John Prestall, Sir Anthony Fortescue, the former Comptroller to Cardinal Pole, two of the Cardinal's nephews, Arthur and Edmund Pole, who were Fortescue's brothers-in-laws, and another conjurer named Kele. Fortescue and the Pole brothers had consulted Prestall and Kele who 'cast their figures to calculate the Queen's life, and duration of her Government and the like' concluding that Elizabeth's reign would be brief and that her death would allow Arthur Pole to become king, through his Plantagenet lineage dating back to his great grandfather, the Duke of Clarence, brother of King Edward IV.²⁵ Mason examined Prestall, the two Pole brothers and Kele at his London residence, while Rutland held Fortescue as part of his ongoing investigation into Cardinal Pole. Details of the examinations are unknown but in a letter to Mason, the Privy Council identified Kele as the weakest link asking that he 'examyn dilligently uppon suche pointes as the sayde Kele shulde open unto him' to determine the full scope of the conjuring and possibility of a wider conspiracy.²⁶

On 25 November 1558, with the details of Mason and Rutland's examinations before them, the Privy councillors discovered that all those arrested could not be charged

²⁴ HoP *Commons*, 1558-1603, p.30; M. M. Norris, 'Manners, Henry, second earl of Rutland (1526-1563)', *ODNB*, 2008, [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/17955>].

²⁵ Strype, *Annals of the Reformation*, I, p.7.

²⁶ TNA PC 2/8 f.196, Meeting of the Privy Council at Hatfield, 22 November, 1558.

for using magic because Henry VIII's 1542 Act against witchcraft had been inadvertently repealed in 1547 by Edward VI. Therefore, they must be 'sett at lybertye [with] bandes being first taken of eche of them in the somme of one hundreth pounds that they shulde be furthecummynge, when they shalbe called for by the Lordes of the counsell'.²⁷ At best the Council could only send Fortescue, as the former Cardinal's Comptroller, to Edmund Bonner, the Catholic Bishop of London, for 'severe punishment against them that shalbe proved culpable herein, according to thorder of theecclesyasticall lawes' for consulting astrologers.²⁸

In November 1558, Prestall and Kele were not alone in casting nativities for insights into Elizabeth's reign. As Mason and Rutland, along with two of Cecil's trusted men, John Marsh and Thomas Sackford, investigated the rumours of conjuring in London 'divers other conjurers' were put into custody for 'the same design and purpose' as Prestall and Kele.²⁹ Amongst the others were included John Thirkle, a London tailor, and one Richard Parlaben whom the Council placed under house arrest.³⁰ Both men, like Prestall, had cast horoscopes about Elizabeth's life expectancy, but the surviving evidence reveals they were two men of very different character to Prestall, and with no relationship to his disgruntled Catholic group. Unlike Prestall, they did not need insights into Elizabeth's life to plan and plot for her replacement, but consulted the stars to know if the turmoil of Edward and Mary's reigns would continue into Elizabeth's reign.

The Elizabethan regime recognised that astrology could inspire subversive political activities from hostile elements within and without the realm, but had learned firsthand in its opening days just how toothless it had been left when acting against such

²⁷ TNA PC 2/8 f.198, Meeting of the Privy Council at the Charterhouse, 25 November, 1558.

²⁸ *APC 1558-1570*, p.22, At Strond Howse, xvijth of December, 1558; 'Fortescue, Sir Anthony' *ODNB*.

²⁹ TNA PC 2/8 f.198, Meeting at the Charterhouse, 25 November, 1558; TNA PC 2/8 f.198, Meeting at the Charterhouse in London, 24 November 1558; Strype, *Annals of the Reformation*, I, p.7.

³⁰ TNA PC 2/8 f.198, Meeting at the Charterhouse in London, 24 November 1558.

conjuring. Therefore it took steps to close the legal loophole created in 1547 so that men like Prestall and his associates could be heavily punished for their conjuring. Elizabeth's first Parliament opened at Westminster, on 25 January 1559, ten days after her coronation.³¹ During this Parliamentary session the Council sought to revive the felonies statute repealed by Edward VI, by tabling a bill before the House of Commons carrying the same title as Henry VIII's original law to punish 'conjurations, witchcraft, prophesies and buggery'.³² Geoffrey Elton called this Bill a 'private enterprise' as it did not derive from the Government's business agenda for the 1559 Parliamentary session.³³ However, Cecil's close involvement in the passage of the bill in its eventual form as the 1563 Witchcraft Act suggests that he may have inspired its admission by one of his clients. The 1559 Witchcraft Bill passed its first readings in both the House of Commons and House of Lords but proceeded no further towards passing into law because Elizabeth prorogued Parliament in early May and all unfinished business before Parliament lapsed. Compared to the Government's need to re-establish royal supremacy and establish Protestant uniformity in the Church, the Witchcraft Bill had lower priority, as Catholic resistance slowed the passage of the Protestant legislation.

After his release from custody in November 1558, the perpetually in debt Prestall, married the widowed Isabell Catesby in late 1559 as a means to restore his damaged finances. As discussed in the previous chapter, Prestall spent the next two years separating Isabell's twelve-year-old son Henry Owen from his inheritance. Prestall used extortion and promises of alchemical gold, while unloading as much of his own debts as possible onto the minor before fleeing. This particular situation reveals aspects of the dark side of Prestall's character that leads to his later use of occult philosophy for self-

³¹ Parliament was set to open on 23 January but Elizabeth did 'not feel herself in good disposition of body, nor unmindful of the perils that her too much boldness by coming abroad might cause'. See T. E. Hartley (ed.), *Proceedings in the Parliament of Elizabeth I*, Vol. I, 1558-1581, Leicester, 1981, p.3.

³² Geoffrey Elton, *The Parliament of England 1559-1581*, Cambridge, 1986, p.110.

³³ Elton, *The Parliament of England*, p.111.

advancement. Prestall ruined a family whilst attempting to put his own financial situation to right. However the discovery of Catholic Mass being held amongst the Essex gentry around the same time had important implications for Court politics and would see Prestall using his occult skills again. To understand Prestall's actions and the activities leading to Parliament passing the 1563 Witchcraft Act, we must go into the Waldegrave Affairs and its background, because Prestall has never been connected to these events before.

In 1558, Prestall and his fellow disgruntled Catholics did not operate in isolation. Although no others were implicated in Prestall's 1558 horoscope casting, Alvaro de la Quadra, Bishop of Aquila and the Spanish ambassador, mentioned in his December 1559 dispatches Elizabeth's displeasure at members of the Catholic political community 'greatly caressing' the Pole brothers as potential Catholic claimants to the English throne.³⁴ De Quadra, particularly identified Lord Edward Hastings of Loughborough, Mary I's Chamberlain and a distant kinsman of the Pole Brothers, as prominent within the Pole circle, recklessly grooming them as pawns through which to achieve his desired goal of returning England's state religion to Catholicism.³⁵

Hastings had received his peerage from Mary and his strong Catholic sentiments were well known, so when Elizabeth reshuffled her Privy Council she removed Hastings along with three other Marian Catholic councillors.³⁶ Although removed as a councillor, Hastings remained at Court where he continued to perform minor services, but in September 1559 with nothing to attract him to the Protestant regime, he withdrew to his

³⁴ *CSP Spanish*, 1558-1567, p.119, n. 81, The Bishop of Aquila to the Count De Feria, 27 December 1559.

³⁵ *CSP Spanish* 1558-1567, p.119, n. 81, Aquila to De Feria, 27 December 1559.

³⁶ David Loades, 'Hastings, Edward, Baron Hastings of Loughborough (1512x15?–1572)', *ODNB*, 2008, [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/12563>].

estate at Stoke Poges in Buckinghamshire.³⁷ Hastings epitomised the predicament of many diehard Catholics in the English aristocracy and gentry. They grasped at the remaining vestiges of Catholic England and withdrew to the countryside, where most of the English population were only nominally Protestant and still maintained Catholic practices.³⁸

Many Catholic politicians, like Hastings, were also willing to consider conspiracies to return England to the Catholic faith and themselves to power by encouraging those like Arthur Pole, who had a slender claim to the throne. Pole had also found himself an outsider after Elizabeth rejected his offer of service at her accession.³⁹ No doubt his arrest for conjuring against her and his own distant claim to the English throne hampered his case. For many Catholic nobles the alternatives to political impotence were voluntary exile or involvement in increasingly desperate plots against Elizabeth's new regime.

On 14 April 1561, one such plot came to light when Customs officials at Gravesend intercepted a former monk and Catholic priest, Father John Coxe, alias Devon, *en route* for Flanders. Coxe had in his possession a rosary, a breviary, letters destined for English Catholics in exile and a quantity of money. Examined by Hugh Darrell, a local Justice of the Peace, Coxe confessed to saying Mass with five other priests for a group of Essex gentry, who maintained a number of Catholic priests for their practice of the Catholic faith.⁴⁰ The authorities in Kent sent Coxe to London, where as a priest he underwent ecclesiastical interrogation before Edmund Grindal, the new

³⁷ Wallace MacCaffrey, *The Shaping of the Elizabethan Regime*, Princeton, 1968 pp.26-27; 'Hastings, Edward, Baron Hastings of Loughborough', *ODNB*.

³⁸ Questier, *Catholicism and Community*, pp.15-20.

³⁹ Hazel Pierce, 'Pole, Arthur (1531/2–1570?)', *ODNB*, 2008, [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/22443>].

⁴⁰ TNA SP 12/16 ff.117r-118r, The Examination of John [Coxe] Devon, taken before Hugh Darrell, 14 April 1561.

Protestant Bishop of London.⁴¹ In his confession on 17 April, Coxe contended that the new religion of England was not the true faith, and that he had said Mass, after Elizabeth's religious settlement had come into legal force, for a network of leading Essex families. These families included the former Marian councillors Sir Edward Waldegrave, Sir Thomas Wharton, Edward Lord Hastings of Loughborough and Francis Englefield.⁴² This group was to become known as the Waldegrave prayer circle.

While Grindal was drawing his confession from Father Coxe, the Privy Council appointed commissioners 'to enquire for masse mongers and coniuers'.⁴³ Led by the Lord Lieutenant of Essex, the Earl of Oxford, the commission raided the suspected gentry's homes named in Coxe's confessions, thoroughly searching their properties for evidence of Catholic idolatry. At Wharton's Newhall estate the searches failed to 'fynde any cause or presumpcion whereby his faithe and allegiaunce to the state was anyway impaired'.⁴⁴ Although at Waldegrave's manor at Borley the authorities turned up Catholic correspondence in which 'some myndes and doinges towards thestate and governmente are implied', but nothing to incriminate the group in plotting a wider treason.⁴⁵ The Privy Council found itself hamstrung. They sought to make an example of the many lay Catholics arrested, but only procured confessions of hearing Catholic Mass, and an inventory of seized Mass performing utensils.⁴⁶

⁴¹ The Former Bishop of London, Edmund Bonner, was removed from the post in June 1559, for refusing to take the Oath of Supremacy.

⁴² Jones, *The Birth of Elizabethan England*, p.36.

⁴³ Anon, 'A 'Journall' of Matters of State Happened from Time to Time as Well within and Without The Realme From and Before the Death of King Edw. The 6th Untill The Yere 1562', BL Add. Ms. 48023, ff. 350r-369v, in Simon Dams, Ian W. Archer, and G.W. Bernard (eds.), *Religion, Politics, and Society in Sixteenth Century England*, Camden Fifth Series, Vol. 22, Cambridge, 2003, p.70. (f.354v of original manuscript).

⁴⁴ TNA SP 12/16 f.121r, Pynford (Earl of Oxford) to the Privy Council, from Castle Hedingham, 19 April 1561.

⁴⁵ TNA SP 12/16 f.121r, Pynford to the Privy Council, 19 April 1561.

⁴⁶ TNA SP 12/16 ff.123r-123v, An Inventory of All Such Implements of Superstition as were Found in the Chamber near Lady Wharton's Bed-Chamber, 1561.

The lay Catholics could therefore be charged before the Essex Assize only with violating the Act of Uniformity. But the capture of Coxe conveniently played into William Cecil's hands. Coxe's admission of having partaken in sorcery gave Cecil the means to denigrate England's Catholics and allowed him to gain an advantage to be used in his tussle with Robert Dudley over influence with the Queen and subsequent control of state policy. Dudley's wife had died in September 1560, freeing him to marry Elizabeth I. In 1561 Dudley approached the Spanish ambassador, de Quadra, enquiring whether the Spanish King would approve of the marriage in return for Dudley ensuring that Elizabeth would re-establish Catholicism as England's state religion.⁴⁷ As a demonstration of good faith Dudley argued for allowing the papal nuncio to enter England with an invitation for Elizabeth I to attend the re-convened Council of Trent in 1563.⁴⁸ Cecil, as an ardent Protestant, feared a return to Catholicism and an Elizabeth-Dudley marriage would end his political career, as he would be blocked when Dudley became King. In September 1560, after speaking to Cecil, de Quadra believed Cecil 'clearly foresaw the ruin of the realm through Robert's intimacy with the Queen, who surrendered all affairs to him and meant to marry him'.⁴⁹ Coxe's confession however enabled Sir William Cecil to counter Dudley's move by assembling evidence of a Catholic plot using magic against Elizabeth.

During his interrogation by Grindal, Coxe confessed to using the Mass for the purposes of sorcery at the home of Father Leonard Bilson, Salisbury Cathedral's Prebendary, where he hallowed 'certeyn coinurations for the use of the sayde Bilsons who practiced by those meanes to obteyne the love of my Ladye Cotton, the late wiffe of

⁴⁷ *CSP Spanish*, 1558-1567, p.179, n. 122, The Same to the Same [Bishop Quadra to the King], 22 January 1561; Wallace MacCaffrey, *Shaping of the Elizabethan Regime*, p.103.

⁴⁸ MacCaffrey, *Shaping of the Elizabethan Regime*, pp.103-104.

⁴⁹ *CSP Spanish*, 1558-1567, p.175, n. 119, Bishop Quadra to the Duchess of Parma, 11 September 1560.

Sir Richard Cotton'.⁵⁰ Cecil grasped the significance of this confession, and all the arrested priests from Essex were brought to London. After Coxe's confession Grindal had reminded the Privy Council that 'Surely for this magicke and conjurations your honors of the Cownsell muste apoynte some extraordinarie punishement for example', because there was still no law against witchcraft.⁵¹ Unlike the punishment Sir Anthony Fortescue received for consulting Prestall in 1558, Grindal complained to Cecil, 'our ecclesiasticall punishement is to slender for so grevouse offenses' for dealing with Coxe.⁵²

Grindal had consulted the Lord Chief Justice, Robert Catlyn, who confirmed that 'the temporall lawe will not medle with them' because the witchcraft laws had been repealed.⁵³ Cecil, not content with this conclusion, asked Catlyn for another legal opinion on the possibility of trying someone for using magic without a legal statute. Catlyn researched back to 1371, during the reign of Edward III, before unearthing a case of sorcery tried without legislation.⁵⁴ In that case the accused was tried without an indictment because the Court Clerks could find no precedent to try him, as there had never been a case of sorcery tried in court before 1371.⁵⁵ Catlyn also found in Britton's legal textbook, believed at the time to date from the reign of Edward I, that those attainted of sorcery should be burnt.⁵⁶ A suggestion Cecil ignored, probably feeling it would make unwelcome connections between Elizabeth's reign and the terrible heretic burnings in Mary's reign.

⁵⁰ TNA SP 12/16 f.120r, The Articles ministered to John Coxe alias Devon before Edmund Grindal Bishop of London, 17 April 1561.

⁵¹ TNA SP 12/16 f.115r, Edmund Grindal, Bishop of London, to the Privy Council, 17 April 1561.

⁵² TNA SP 12/16 f.115r, Grindal to the Privy Council, 17 April 1561.

⁵³ TNA SP 12/16 f.136r, Grindal to the Privy Council, 17 April 1561.

⁵⁴ Sir James Dyer, *Reports from the Lost Notebooks of Sir James Dyer*, J.H. Baker (ed.), Vol. I, London, 1994, p.lxix.

⁵⁵ TNA SP 12/16 f.136r, Robert Catlyn, Lord Chief Justice of England, to Sir William Cecil, 21 April 1561.

⁵⁶ TNA SP 12/16 f.136r, Catlyn, to Cecil, 21 April 1561; Dyer, *Lost Notebooks*, p.64b.

Cecil continued compiling evidence to enhance Coxe and his fellow priests' sorcery emphasising the use of magic while excising that it was love magic. To convince Elizabeth they had conspired to kill her with sorcery, he imprisoned them with three other priests Francis Coxe, Hugh Draper and Ralph Davis, who had been employed to kill one of Elizabeth's gentlewomen, Lady Elizabeth St Loe.⁵⁷ The conjuring trio had been in legal limbo since March 1560 after being denounced by an astrologer named John Mann for attempting to use necromancy to kill Lady St Loe, Sir William St Loe's second wife.⁵⁸ Sir William, a trusted servant of Queen Elizabeth, was Butler of England and Wales and Captain of the Guard. His younger brother and one of his daughters from his first marriage employed Coxe, Draper and Davis to kill the Lady St Loe, in order to stop the St Loes' ancient ancestral estate passing to her, and out of the St Loe family, when Sir William died.⁵⁹ Several attempts had already been made on her life before the family employed the conjuring trio, who had also failed in their attempt before their arrest.

In June 1561 the Essex authorities indicted twenty eight lay members of the Essex Mass group before the Assize Court. Convicted for hearing Mass in violation of Elizabeth's Act of Uniformity, all were sentenced to remain in prison until they paid the fine of 100 marks.⁶⁰ Cecil had their convictions announced in London and de Quadra reported to King Philip that the sentence of Wharton, Waldegrave and Loughborough 'was pronounced at Westminster with all the solemnity usual in cases of treason,

⁵⁷ Jones, 'Defining Superstitions', p.193.

⁵⁸ Jones, 'Defining Superstitions', p.193.

⁵⁹ Mary S. Lovell, *Bess of Hardwick: First Lady of Chatsworth, 1527-1608*, London, 2005, pp.156-157; HoP *Commons*, 1558-1603, III, pp.330-331; Jones, 'Defining Superstitions', p.193. The St Loe family were right to suspect Lady Elizabeth (later Bess Hardwick), who obtained much of the Talbot estate through her marriage to the Earl of Shrewsbury.

⁶⁰ Jones, 'Defining Superstitions', p.195.

[though] nothing was found against them but the hearing of mass'.⁶¹ An act that set the public at attention for the trial of the imprisoned priests.

While Cecil considered how to further maximise political effect of these convictions, the nine imprisoned conjuring priests went on trial. In the absence of witchcraft laws Cecil could not find a way to indict the priests before the Queen's Bench. However by conflating John Coxe's story with Francis Coxe, Draper and Davis' story, he could argue that the priests connected to the Waldegrave prayer circle, and the would-be St Loe assassins, were connected and had intended violence against Elizabeth and her subjects. Therefore they were arraigned before the Star Chamber under the 1371 precedent found by Catlyn.⁶² At their trial on 20 June 1561 the entire group of priests were sentenced to be pilloried and forced publicly to acknowledge their activities.⁶³ Sir Edward Coke later recorded their punishment as an important legal precedent. Using magic was portrayed as a serious crime and they were sentenced in the absence of a witchcraft law, on 23 June 1561, to swear publicly on the bible

that from henceforth yeshall not use, practize, devise, or put in vse or exercise, or cause, procure, consell, agree, assist, or consent to be vsed, deuised, practized, put in vse, or exercised any inuocations or coniuratons of spirits, witchcraft, inchantments, or sorceries, or any thing whatsoeuer, touching or in any wise concerning the same.⁶⁴

⁶¹ CSP *Spanish*, 1558-1567, p.208, n.134, Bishop of Quadra to the King, 30 June 1561.

⁶² Dyer, *Lost Notebooks*, pp.64b, 65b.

⁶³ Dyer, *Lost Notebooks*, p.65b.

⁶⁴ Edward Coke, *A booke of entries containing perfect and approued presidents of counts, declarations, informations, pleints, inditements, barres, replications, reioynders, pleadings, processes, continuances, essoines, issues, defaults, departure in despite of the court, demurrers, trialls, iudgements, executions, and all other matters and proceedings (in effect) concerning the practique part of the laws of England, in actions reall, personall, and mixt, and in appeales; necessarie to be knowne, and of excellent vse for the moderne practise of the law, many of them contayning matters in law and points of great learning: and none of them euer imprinted heretofore. Collected and published for the common good and benefit of all the studious and learned professors of the laws of England*, London, 1614, sig, B1.

This performance was repeated two days later, in Cheapside, in order to advertise their crimes as the wickedness of Popery as widely as possible in London.⁶⁵

The confessions and court indictment of the arrested Catholic clergy incorporated every stereotype Protestant England held about English Catholics: they were disloyal, did not accept Protestantism as the true faith, and their superstitious religion involved conjuring spirits, witchcraft, enchantments and sorcery against the Queen and her Protestant subjects. By using the convictions and confessions to inflate the Catholic threat, Cecil dashed Dudley's hopes of marrying Elizabeth. In light of the reported Catholic conjuring, every member of the Privy Council voted to reject the papal nuncio's request for admission into England, and Dudley would have to wait until October 1562 before becoming a Privy councillor.⁶⁶ Negotiations between the Privy Council and papal nuncio were broken off, shattering Dudley's good faith gesture to Philip of Spain. Cecil used the Waldegrave Affair to triumphant and reassert his influence over Council policy. Although Dudley remained Elizabeth's favourite and apparently could do no wrong, his attempt to marry Elizabeth had sharpened Cecil's already persistent focus on the royal succession, because that would be the only guarantee of Protestant England's survival.

Having blocked Dudley's plans, Cecil carefully nurtured a single offshoot from the Waldegrave circle. He hoped to use it to trap more Catholics conspiring against the Queen, possibly even to implicate Mary Stuart, his perennial obsession, and thus to exclude her from the English succession. Amongst the evidence seized in Essex were discussions amongst the former Marian councillors about the possibility of creating a Catholic successor to Elizabeth I. After his arrest in April 1561 Lord Hastings, protected by his status, spent time in the custody of a loyal Elizabethan Catholic, the Earl of Pembroke. Pembroke soon persuaded the opportunistic Hastings to abandon his hard-

⁶⁵ Machyn, *The Diary of Henry Machyn*, p.261.

⁶⁶ MacCaffrey, *The Shaping of the Elizabethan Regime*, p.108.

line Catholic stance and accept the new religious settlement, especially given the alternative of imprisonment.⁶⁷ Elizabeth pardoned Hastings in August 1561 and shortly afterwards Arthur Pole was unexpectedly released, probably by Cecil's design. Cecil had evidence that Lord Hastings had written to Arthur Pole urging him to marry the Earl of Northumberland's sister and thus increase Catholic support for his claims.⁶⁸ Rumours swirled around Court that 'newe costly apparell was prepared [more] then was thought convenient for suche personages [marriage], and many were invyted to the feaste'.⁶⁹ Having prevented any possibility of this wedding when he arrested the Essex Catholic gentry, Cecil allowed Pole to make his next move, knowing that the Pole brothers were in contact with Anthony Fortescue and John Prestall, who had rejoined his associates in 1558. This group had begun devising an audacious plan to return England to Catholicism. Cecil, keenly aware of the threat Mary Queen of Scots presented after she returned to Scotland in August 1561, used an informer, Humphrey Barwick, to infiltrate the group, observe and report.

Prestall rejoined Fortescue and the Pole brothers at Southwark in mid 1562 to plan their overthrow of Elizabeth I. He may have funded part of their plotting with some of his stepson, Henry Owen's, inheritance. As in 1558 Prestall's initial role was to conjure for the conspirators. According to the later indictment, at Southwark on 10 September 1562, Prestall assisted by Edward Cosyn 'dyd invocate a wicked spryte, and demaunded of him the best waye to bring all their treasons to passe'.⁷⁰ The spirit told

⁶⁷ David Starkey, *Elizabeth: Apprenticeship*, London, 2000, p.303.

⁶⁸ Anon 'Journall' BL Ms Add 48023, p.71, f.345v.

⁶⁹ Anon 'Journall' BL Ms Add 48023, pp.71-72, f.345v.

⁷⁰ TNA, KB 8/40, trial of Fortescue, Pole, Pole, Byngnam, Spencer, Barwick, 23 February 1562; Strype, *Annals of the Reformation*, I, p.556. Strype's transcription of the Kings Bench is very brief summary.

Prestall that Elizabeth I would die in March 1563. An insight, Cecil later conceded to Sir Thomas Smith, the English ambassador to Paris, provoked the conspirators into action.⁷¹

Following his conjuring Prestall remained on the Southwark side of the Thames for the next month, continuing preparations to carry out the group's plans. On 10 October 1562 he and Cosyn embarked from Gravesend on a Flemish vessel bound for Flanders, the vanguard of the scheme to seek foreign aid. However, four days after Prestall's departure disaster struck for Cecil and the Privy Council when Elizabeth contracted smallpox, forcing Cecil to spring his trap prematurely and snare those at hand while the conspiracy was still only in its infancy. Cecil's men swooped on Fortescue, the two Pole Brothers, two of Lord Hasting's servants, Richard Byngham and Anthony Spencer, as well as Cecil's agent Humphrey Barwick, while they waited in the Dolphyn Inn at Saint Olaves for the tide to change and carry them from London Bridge to a Flemish Hoyer in the Thames Estuary *en route* to the Netherlands.⁷² At Saint Olaves, Cecil's men found the conspirators boat loaded with supplies and munitions that they had collected for transport to the Netherlands, where they would join up with Prestall and Cosyn.⁷³ Prestall had prepared for their arrival using the money he had forced his stepson Owen to send to the Netherlands for the purchase of 'certain merchandize'.⁷⁴ But with their co-conspirators now captured, Prestall and Cosyn were stranded in the Netherlands, unable to return to England without being arrested, especially as Elizabeth had been struck down with smallpox soon after Prestall had conjured spirits about her life expectancy. Witchcraft law or not, this would obviously have constituted treason to the Protestant Elizabethans.

⁷¹ BL Lansdowne MS 102 f.25r, Sir William Cecil to Sir Thomas Smith, 27 February 1563.

⁷² TNA KB 8/40, Kings Bench trial of Anthony Fortescue, Arthur Pole, Edmund Pole, Richard Byngham, Anthony Spencer, Humphrey Barwick, 23 February 1562.

⁷³ TNA KB 8/40, trial of Fortescue, Pole, Pole, Byngham, Spencer, Barwick, 23 February 1562.

⁷⁴ TNA C3/135/18, Owen's Deposition against Prestall, Case Date Unknown.

The conspirators' actual plans are unknown as they are now obscured by Cecil's official story. Cecil's version probably resembles in part the accused's actual plans but this official version reflects Cecil's obsessions, making it impossible to separate reality from embellishment. The official story presented at the King's Bench trial of those caught and in the calendar of Patent Rolls accused the group of intending to 'goe aboute not onelye to depryve and depose the queen, but also her death and destruction, and to sette upp and make the Skottsyhe queen queen of this realme'.⁷⁵ Cecil's version claimed that once they arrived in Flanders, Arthur Pole would claim his great-grandfather's title as Duke of Clarence, and after he crossed into France a marriage between Edmund Pole and Mary Stuart would be negotiated, uniting Mary's Tudor lineage and Pole's Plantagenet bloodline to create an irrefutable Catholic claim to the English throne.⁷⁶ They would then invade England through Wales, landing at Milford Haven in May 1563 to raise rebellion with an army of 6,000 men, provided by Mary's relatives from the powerful French Catholic House of Guise.⁷⁷ Once on the English throne Mary would confirm Arthur Pole's dukedom, return England to Catholicism, and reward those individuals, like Prestall, who had brought about her succession as Queen of England.

The indictment against the group also implicated foreign powers. According to the official account, Fortescue discussed Arthur Pole's plan with the Spanish and French ambassadors, asking for assistance from their Governments. The Spanish ambassador, de Quadra, publicly denied ever having met either of the Pole brothers. However he acknowledged as much to Philip II, before denouncing the scheme as 'an empty business'. He had therefore 'refused to lend an ear to his [Fortescues] foolishness'.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ TNA KB 8/40, trial of Fortescue, Pole, Pole, Byngham, Spencer, Barwick, 23 February 1562; *CPR, Elizabeth I, 1566-1569*, pp.63-64, n.455; Strype, *Annals of the Reformation*, I, p.555.

⁷⁶ *CPR, Elizabeth I, 1566-1569*, pp.63-64, n.455.

⁷⁷ *CPR, Elizabeth I, 1566-1569*, pp.63-64, n.455; Hazel Pierce, 'Pole, Arthur (1531/2-1570?)', *ODNB*, 2008, [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/22443>].

⁷⁸ *CSP Spanish, 1558-1567*, pp.278-279, n.202, Bishop Quadra to the King, 10 January 1563.

Arthur Pole approached Paul de Foix, the French ambassador, and allegedly added the idea of marrying Edmund Pole to Mary, Queen of Scots and putting her on the English throne in order to draw French and Guisard support.⁷⁹ Apart from Cecil's carefully crafted indictment there is no evidence that the Pole brothers actively supported Mary's claims to the English throne over their own, and it is absurd to think that Spain would provide assistance for France to acquire influence over England through Mary's accession. Rather, these threads of the indictment reflect Cecil's political obsessions and allowed him to use the conspiracy for political leverage in Court and Parliament.

Cecil held Fortescue, the Pole brothers and their cohort of plotters in the Tower after their arrest. As with the conjuring trio of Francis Coxe, Draper, and Davis, he sought to time their trial to maximise its potential political mileage. In November 1562, Elizabeth had recovered sufficiently to issue writs calling for elections for a Parliament the following January. Cecil revealed his plan to his close friend, Sir Thomas Smith, two days after the writs appeared, stating 'the matter of the Pooles here shall not be medled withal until Parlement'.⁸⁰ Cecil was not alone in wanting to settle the royal succession away from Mary Stuart. He knew that he could rely on Protestants, many in the House of Commons, to petition Elizabeth to make that decision. By holding the treason trial implicating Mary Stuart during the Parliamentary session he could create the same sense of urgency amongst moderate members.

Cecil was using the conspiracy to highlight the domestic threat from disgruntled Catholics and the external threat of Catholic Spain and France, both of whom, he contended, wanted to replace Elizabeth. Days before Parliament opened Cecil stoked public hysteria around the plot by accusing de Quadra of encouraging the conspirators on

⁷⁹ Anon 'Journall' BL Ms Add 48023, p.71, footnote 91.

⁸⁰ BL Lansdowne MS 102 f.37r, Sir William Cecil to Sir Thomas Smith, 13 November 1562.

behalf of Spain.⁸¹ Parliament's Speaker, Cecil's brother-in-law, Lord Keeper Bacon, used his opening speech in Parliament to emphasise the threat of England's old enemy, Catholic France, who he said 'joyned with a divelish conspiracy within our selves tending to the aydinge of the forreyne enemye, and by their owne confession to have raysed a rebellion within this realme'.⁸² This effectively stirred up Parliament over the issue of succession, and an anonymous member of the Commons raising a motion 'for the succession' on the second day of the session.⁸³ This prompted debate that ended only when Elizabeth insisted that the decision over her marriage belonged exclusively to her prerogative. Having this avenue shut, and still shaken by Elizabeth's near death experience, the Privy Council tried to legislate for any future interregnum, proposing that it should take control of state affairs and decide who would replace Elizabeth, to prevent Mary Stuart's succession.⁸⁴

Cecil then turned to passing anti-Catholic legislation. He told Smith when Parliament opened that he intended its business to include the 'revivying of some old lawes for penalties of some fellonyes'.⁸⁵ On 8 February 1563 Cecil's Witchcraft Bill was introduced to the Commons. When introduced to Parliament, the bill was presented as an omnibus bill, given the cumbersome title 'the bill for servant robbing their masters and buggery to be felony and punishment of enchantments and prophesying of badges' (also known as 'the bill for servants robbing their masters, buggery, invocation of evil spirits, enchantment and witchcraft'). The bill passed its first reading in the Commons on 11 February 1563 and was then voted up to the House of Lords, where it received its second

⁸¹ *CSP Spanish, 1558-1567*, p.293, n.210, Bishop Quadra to the King, 27 January 1563.

⁸² Hartley, *Proceedings*, Vol. I, p.71.

⁸³ Stephen Alford, *The Early Elizabethan Polity: William Cecil And The British Succession Crisis, 1558-1569*, New York, 1998, p.106.

⁸⁴ For details of Cecil's interregnum plan see Alford, *The Early Elizabethan Polity*, pp.104-113.

⁸⁵ BL Lansdowne MS 102, f.18r, William Cecil to Sir Thomas Smith, 14 January 1562.

reading on 15 February. Cecil had used the imminent treason trial to maximum effect, generating support that would ensure the bill passed both the Commons and the Lords.

With Cecil's witchcraft law all but in the bag the treason trial began on 23 February 1563 at Westminster Hall, only yards away from both Houses of Parliament.⁸⁶ Fortescue pleaded guilty to conspiring 'to come wth a power into Wales, and to proclayme y^e Scottish Queene'.⁸⁷ This sealed the fate of all his co-accused who all defended themselves by arguing that their actions did not constitute treason, because they had not intended to act until Elizabeth died, which Prestall had told them would be in the foreseeable future.⁸⁸ The court found them all guilty of treason, including Prestall and Edward Cosyn who were tried *in absentia*. Sentencing took place on 26 February where the standard death sentence for treason was handed down.⁸⁹ On 27 February Cecil noted that because Fortescue pleaded guilty he was 'therby never to take hold of mercy'.⁹⁰ However, Elizabeth granted clemency to all the plotters, probably because Fortescue's brother Sir John Fortescue was the Keeper of the Great Wardrobe, and instead she had them all imprisoned indefinitely in the Tower.⁹¹ Cecil's informer in the group, Humphrey Barwick, was also convicted. He too had awaited trial in the Tower but he received a full pardon four months after his conviction, and the following year received a reward for his service as 'the queen's servant'.⁹² The convictions for treason using magic provided Cecil's final guarantee for passing his Witchcraft Bill, which was finally passed onto the statute book on 13 March 1563, indelibly associating Catholicism with

⁸⁶ TNA KB 8/40, trial of Fortescue, Pole, Pole, Byngnam, Spencer, Barwick, 23 February 1562.

⁸⁷ BL. Lansdowne MS 102, f.25v, William Cecil to Sir Thomas Smith, 27 February 1562.

⁸⁸ TNA KB 8/40, trial of Fortescue, Pole, Pole, Byngnam, Spencer, Barwick, 23 February 1562.

⁸⁹ BL Lansdowne MS 102, f.25v, Cecil to Smith, 27 February 1562.

⁹⁰ BL Lansdowne MS 102, f.25v, Cecil to Smith, 27 February 1562.

⁹¹ 'Fortescue, Sir Anthony' *ODNB*.

⁹² *CPR, Elizabeth I, 1563-1566*, p.337, n.1907.

magic.⁹³ When Elizabeth's second Parliament closed in April the royal succession remained uncertain, but Cecil's careful stage management of the treason trial facilitated his anti-Catholic legislation and made every Protestant political policy-maker aware of the threat Cecil himself perceived Mary, Queen of Scots held for Protestant England.

Prestall had escaped arrest by being abroad, but with his fellow conspirators captured, his own conviction for treason *in absentia* and the money he took from Henry Owen long gone, he remained a fugitive, gravely in debt and marooned, destitute, in a continental exile. In November 1563, fifteen months after leaving England and now separated from Cosyn, Prestall wrote to Cecil from the Netherlands, meekly appealing that:

I am browght into that calamytie wherefore now ther restethe nothyng eells for me to doo, but only by humble intercesyon, to seake to come to my purgation. Wherefore in most submissive and lowlye wyse I do beseache your honor, so to extende your goodness towardes me, as to procure the Quenes majesties letteres, under whose hyghnes protection I may (in savetie) com in to myn answeere, which is the whole effecte of ^my^ desyer ... I have not therein behaved my selfe accordynge to dewtye towards your honourable vocation, that by your wisdom in pardoninge my weaknes, yea wolde excuse this my unaptness, imputinge rather in me the wante of understandynge, then want of good wyll in acknoledginge my dewtye.⁹⁴

Prestall, worried he would be 'a banished man owt of my cuntrye for ever', so also wrote to Robert Dudley, though no reply providing a guarantee of safe passage survives from either courtier.⁹⁵ It is possible neither sent a reply letter, and Prestall just risked a return. More likely Cecil sent a safe conduct letter but rescinded it when Prestall arrived back in England in mid-1564. Either way, after claiming it was his heart's desire for the 'lybertie of my Cuntrye upon suche condityon, that yf I doo not in all poyntes and against all obiections whatsoever they be, answeere holy, and fully in the manifest triall of

⁹³ SR, 1547-1585, pp.445-447, 5 Eliz I. c.15: 'An Act Agaynst Fonde and Phantasticall Propheyses' and 5 Eliz I. c.16: 'An Act Agaynst Conjuracions Inchantmentes and Withecrafftes'.

⁹⁴ TNA SP 12/31 f.20r, Prestall to Cecil, 30 November 1563.

⁹⁵ TNA SP 12/31 f.20r, Prestall to Cecil, 30 November 1563.

my honestie, and true obedience in dewtye towards the Queenes ma^{tie},’ Prestall found himself thrown into the Tower condemned as a traitor when he set foot in England.⁹⁶

While in the Tower, Prestall wrote to influential figures seeking his release in exchange for his services without success.⁹⁷ However the arrival of another alchemist, Cornelius de Lannoy, who promised much but delivered little, clinched Prestall’s release by creating a demand for his alchemical expertise. De Lannoy probably lived in the Netherlands, but also had property interests in Pomerania and claimed to have a doctorate from Cracow.⁹⁸ He first wrote to Cecil and Elizabeth from Bruges in December 1564 offering to make alchemical gold.⁹⁹ He claimed to possess the ability to transmute metals into gold and create a medicine, to cure all ailments, by producing the philosopher’s stone.¹⁰⁰

In February 1565, with the Crown desperately short of funds, Elizabeth and Cecil accepted de Lannoy’s offer to make 50,000 marks of gold a year and agreed to employ him under a royal patent guaranteeing his position as the only licensed alchemist for ten years.¹⁰¹ As a demonstration of Cecil and Elizabeth’s belief in de Lannoy’s ability, they installed him in Somerset House, London, where Cecil used Crown funds to establish an expensive laboratory and paid de Lannoy’s huge pension of £120 per annum in quarterly

⁹⁶ TNA SP 12/31 f.20r, Prestall to Cecil, 30 November 1563.

⁹⁷ Evidence for this is sketchy but the wording of the later letter from The Earl of Pembroke to Burghley, and a diary entry of Burghley’s suggests that it was not the first letters he or other Councillors had received from Prestall. TNA SP 12/39 f.188v, the Earl of Pembroke to William Cecil, 21 May 1566; William Murdin (ed.), *A Collection of State Papers Relating to Affairs in the Reign of Queen Elizabeth from the Year 1571 to 1596. Transcribed from Original Papers and Other Authentic Memorials, Never Before Published, Left by W. Cecill Lord Burghley, and Reposited in the Library at Hatfield House*, London, 1759, p.763.

⁹⁸ TNA SP 12/37 f.6r, Armigil Waad to William Cecil, 12 August 1565.

⁹⁹ TNA SP 70/78 f.188r-189r, Cornelius de Lannoy to Sir William Cecil, 22 December 1564.

¹⁰⁰ TNA SP 12/36 f.24r, Memorial of Cornelius de Alneto [de Lannoy] to the Queen, 7 February 1565.

¹⁰¹ TNA SP 12/36 ff.24r-24v, de Alneto to the Queen, 7 February 1565.

instalments.¹⁰² By August de Lannoy began complaining of the poor quality of English glass. At great expense he ordered specialist alchemical glass vessels from Antwerp and Hesse, thus delaying his production of gold.¹⁰³ While insisting he could produce gold for Elizabeth, de Lannoy's demand for better quality glassware signals the beginning of his delaying tactics.

Armigall Waad managed de Lannoy's venture for Cecil, and began to suspect that de Lannoy was not defrauding Elizabeth as a charlatan, but instead using his alchemical abilities to enrich himself rather than the Queen's Treasury.¹⁰⁴ Waad further reported to Cecil in August 1565 that Montagna, de Lannoy's Spanish laboratory assistant, had told him de Lannoy possessed the elixir but siphoned off all the gold he transmuted to purchase an estate in Pomerania.¹⁰⁵

De Lannoy had also been in contact with Princess Cecilia of Sweden, who visiting London, had run up enormous debts in London. Waad informed Cecil that she and de Lannoy planned to escape England leaving her debts, travelling together to the Netherlands where he would set up a new Laboratory.¹⁰⁶ Cecil therefore placed de Lannoy under house arrest at Somerset house in late 1566 and Princess Cecilia left England and her debts, without him in May 1566.

The final straw came when Waad reported in July 1566 that de Lannoy had deceived Elizabeth when she visited his laboratory in Somerset House, giving her an imperfect copy of the alchemical text he used, which dealt with the 'mercuries of gold and silver'.¹⁰⁷ Elizabeth then demanded a second copy to check against the previous

¹⁰² TNA SP 12/37 f.6r, Armigil Waad to William Cecil, 12 August 1565.

¹⁰³ TNA SP 12/37 ff.6r-6v, Waad to Cecil, 12 August 1565.

¹⁰⁴ TNA SP 12/37 f.7r, Waad to Cecil, 12 August 1565.

¹⁰⁵ TNA SP 12/37 f.6r, Waad to Cecil, 12 August 1565.

¹⁰⁶ HMC *Salisbury*, I, pp.332-333, n.1104: Armigil Wade [Waad] to Sir W. Cecil, 23 March 1565-6.

¹⁰⁷ TNA SP 12/39/39, Armigil Waad to William Cecil, 7 March 1566.

version de Lannoy had given her. This escapade landed de Lannoy in the Tower, where his furnaces were moved in August and Cecil continued to pay de Lannoy's pension. Cecil kept him in the Tower for safekeeping and close supervision while he fulfilled the Queen's alchemical desires.

Cecil and Leicester, who had now involved himself in the de Lannoy venture, still believed de Lannoy could solve the crown's financial woes with alchemical gold. They kept paying him after he provided a statement of his alchemical method in the Tower in July. Waad translated and forwarded this to Cecil and Leicester, with his own calculations based on the statement, that de Lannoy's process would not produce 50,000 marks but rather twenty five times that amount.¹⁰⁸ With constant supervision during his confinement in the Tower there seemed no reason to doubt de Lannoy's assertion that he only needed another thirty two days to complete the elixir and then transmuted gold would begin flowing into the Crown's Treasury. By late 1566, with de Lannoy's thirty two days expired and no sign of a return on Elizabeth's investment, Cecil's patience in de Lannoy ran out and in early 1567 he had de Lannoy transferred to a cell in the Tower, writing 'Cornelius de Lannoy, a Dutchman, comitted to the Towre for abusyng the Q[ueens]. Majesty in Somerset Houss in promising to make the elixar' and a month later added 'and abused many in promising to convert any Metall into Gold'.¹⁰⁹

Prestall, ever the opportunist made use of de Lannoy's fall from favour to press his own alchemical skill in petitioning for release from the Tower. Waad, Cecil's 'fix-it' man, while monitoring de Lannoy also had contact with Prestall who pressed Waad to raise his case before Cecil. So while reporting de Lannoy's complaints about English glass, on 12 August 1565, Waad wrote, 'Mr Prestoll prayed me to remember your honour

¹⁰⁸ TNA SP 15/13 ff.36r-37v, Cornelius Lannoy to the Queen – Translated and Annotated by Waad, July 1566.

¹⁰⁹ Murdin, *A Collection of State Papers*, p.763.

of his sute. He sayeth that being granted that he might at libertie be conversant emong us he wuld do great service.’¹¹⁰ Prestall was referring to alchemy as the ‘great service’ he would give, but at the time Cecil did not take much notice of Prestall’s offer. De Lannoy still held the royal licence monopolising alchemical gold production in 1565 and then Cecil had no reason to doubt de Lannoy. Therefore Prestall made contact with the Earl of Pembroke who took up his cause. Pembroke was open to any means of making money, including the occult arts and patronised the occult philosopher Dr John Dee. Pembroke may have encountered Prestall’s occult abilities with other members of the Privy Council, at the very beginning of Elizabeth’s reign, when he had debated how to deal with Prestall and his fellow Catholics who cast nativities to foretell the Queen’s future.

Pembroke petitioned Cecil, and possibly Leicester, for Prestall’s pardon over the following eighteen months. In 1566, at the age of sixty, Pembroke’s health was steadily declining, so he wrote to Cecil in May emphasising his poor health, claiming that he would ‘nowe somewhat paynefullie teke withstanding my finall journey’ and that he had been ‘preased upon by the greate offer of one Prestoll’ to revive his health with the philosopher’s stone.¹¹¹ However Cecil, knowing Pembroke and his constant desire for money, sceptically noted in his diary after Prestall’s release, ‘Johannes Prestall’s offers by Ar[migall] Wade to convert Silver into Gold, who has his pardon granted at the Erle of Pembrok’s request, as a New Yere’s gift’.¹¹² Released into Pembroke’s service on the proviso he kept his word, Cecil organised Prestall’s royal pardon, which Elizabeth granted on 6 January 1567. Prestall received his pardon:

¹¹⁰ TNA SP 12/37 ff.7v-8r, Waad to Cecil, 12 August 1565.

¹¹¹ TNA SP 12/39 f.188, the Earl of Pembroke to William Cecil, 21 May 1566; Narasingha P. Sil, ‘Herbert, William, first earl of Pembroke (1506/7–1570)’, *ODNB*, 2008, [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/13055>].

¹¹² Murdin, *A Collection of State Papers*, p.763.

for all treasons, all crimes of lese majesty, all rebellions, insurrections and conspiracies against the crown, all murders, felonies and robberies, all misprisons, unlawful speeches, unlawful assembles, riots, routs and trespasses, all conjurations of evil spirits, departures from the realm, contempts, negligences, ingorances, falsehoods and deceptions.¹¹³

While this covered Prestall's conjuring and foreign adventures in 1562, he disappears from the historical record for over two years in Pembroke's service. Whatever he did it must have given the impression of working to cure his patron because Pembroke went on to live for another three years, dying at the age of 63 on 17 March 1570. John Dee, still serving Pembroke at the time of Prestall's release, obviously had struggled to provide Pembroke with the cure he sought, otherwise Pembroke would not have needed to secure Prestall's release from the Tower. To add insult to injury Prestall's brother-in-law, Vincent Murphyn, seeking to secure Prestall's position with Pembroke, forged letters that were published in John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments of the English Martyrs* slandering Dee's to prove he was 'the great coniurer' in the 1560s, and severely tarnished Dee's reputation at the time.¹¹⁴ The animosity between Dee and Prestall would emerge very clearly in the 1570s. But in the late 1560s Dee could only bide his time and absorb the insult of seeing his service for Pembroke in 1552 overshadowed by Prestall's occult interloping.

As we have seen in the politics between 1556 and 1567 concerning England's religion and the royal succession Prestall plays significant role. Politically cutting his teeth in the 1556 Dudley conspiracy Prestall's involvement in conspiracies against the Regime grew to the point where his conjuring and funding were central to the 1562

¹¹³ *CPR Elizabeth I 1566-1569*, p.136, n.880.

¹¹⁴ John Foxe, *Acts and Monuments of the English Martyrs*, London, 1563, p.1427, 1445. References to Dee as a conjurer were removed from the 1576 edition of Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*. For a detailed examination of John Dee see: Glyn Parry, *The Arch-Conjuror of England: John Dee and Magic at the Courts of Renaissance Europe*, New Haven, forthcoming 2010. The status of Murphyn as Prestall's brother-in-law is unclear. There is no evidence to suggest Prestall's sister Joan was not still married to William Cheyney. But Leicester clearly identifies Murphyn's relationship to Prestall. See Lansdowne 99 fo.244r-252r, Depositions of one Murfin, [no date].

conspiracy. This involvement would continue in the 1570, though his self-interested opportunism is more prominent in the way he approaches situations peddling his alchemical talents in exchange for patronage and attention. The Elizabethan regime's response to Prestall's conspiring and the wider use of magic hardens from what it had been in the 1560s because the politics surrounding the royal succession increased to boiling point when Elizabeth's utmost rival claimant for the English crown Mary, Queen of Scots arrived in England.

CHAPTER THREE

1570s: Conspiring to Conjure

In the years 1569-1578 Elizabeth's regime faced several threats to its survival. John Prestall played a key role in these events which have been until now overlooked. Although the exact details of Prestall's activities may never be fully known, by examination of the evidence we can document how these threats played out, and how Cecil, while recognising Prestall's importance, manipulated the events to reshape the political landscape in his favour, just as he had done in the 1560s. To demonstrate this, we must put Prestall's biography in the context of some crucial but well known events that shaped the 1570s.

When Elizabeth came to the throne, England and Spain held a fragile peace rooted in a mutual belief that France provided the greater immediate threat to either realm. The peace between the nominally Protestant England and Spain bound by Philip's messianic brand of Catholicism, held for a decade until 1568 when two events in England caused an irreversible rupture in English-Spanish relations. First Mary, Queen of Scots fled across the Scottish border into England, and secondly Cecil persuaded Elizabeth to detain Genoese gold carried on five ships bound for the Spanish Netherlands to pay for the Spanish army garrisoned there.

In May 1568 Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots slipped across the Solway Firth into England, after escaping her imprisonment at Loch Leven Castle and a disastrous rising to reclaim her throne. Mary's arrival in England presented the Elizabeth's Privy Council with a quandary over how to respond to her presence, which gave malcontent Catholics an instant alternative claimant to the English throne. Cecil held Mary in Tutbury and

Bolton Castles while he organised an inquiry, at York and Westminster, into Mary's involvement in the murder of her former husband, Lord Darnley. While Cecil probed for a way to disqualify Mary's claim to the English throne, she became the focus of a Court conspiracy.

The Spanish ships seizure had a far more immediate effect in shattering Anglo-Spanish relations. In November 1568 five ships took shelter at the English port of Plymouth to escape pursuing French pirates. The ship's cargo consisted of £85,000 worth of gold destined for King Philip's military forces stationed and fighting in the Spanish Netherlands.¹ The gold was a loan from Genoese bankers and William Cecil grasped the opportunity to supplement the English Crown's tottering finances by appropriating the loan. The arrival of the Spanish ships coincided with news of the destruction of John Hawkins' trading fleet at Juan de Ulúa, in the New World, by the Spanish, protecting their claim to a monopoly on New World trade. Cecil had the gold unloaded under the pretext of preventing its theft, but in retaliation for the Spanish attack on Hawkins he refused to return it to the Spanish ships.² Cecil intended to have the Genoese loan transferred to Elizabeth, who would repay the Genoese. However, this was no comfort to the Spanish and the Spanish ambassador to England, Don Guerau de Spes, asked the Duke of Alva, the Spanish Governor in the Netherlands, to confiscate English property in the Netherlands and Spain in reprisal.³ In what became a spiralling diplomatic tit-for-tat Elizabeth responded by impounding Spanish property in England and detaining Spes under house arrest. Which led to the Spanish to embargo all English goods from entering the Spanish Netherlands in January 1569. As the Netherlands was

¹ Conyers Read, *Mr Secretary Cecil and Queen Elizabeth*, London, 1965, p.432.

² Penry Williams, *Later Tudors*, p.253.

³ Geoffrey Parker, *The Grand Strategy of Philip II*, New Haven (CT), 1998, p.155.

England's entry and exit point for European exports and imports, Cecil's actions threatened economic disaster for England and left him in a vulnerable position at court.⁴

At court, Elizabeth's remaining Catholic courtiers sought to capitalise on Cecil's vulnerability, allying with ostensibly Protestant opponents. The circle included the Earl of Arundel, Earl of Leicester, Lord Lumley and Prestall's current patron, the Earl of Pembroke who claimed that Cecil, through his role as Secretary of State held undue influence over Elizabeth's policy making. They saw in Mary, Queen of Scots a way to marginalise him while assuring the royal succession in a way that favoured their interests. The group approached Thomas Howard, fourth Duke of Norfolk and premier nobleman of the realm, suggesting he should marry Mary, Queen of Scots. Norfolk may have kept his family tradition alive and been a Catholic at heart, but publicly he conformed to the Elizabethan Protestant church. The recalcitrant courtiers sold the marriage to Norfolk as a cure to resolve the succession crisis, a way to create peace with France, and to unite the two kingdoms of Britain into one British kingdom under Norfolk and Mary's children.⁵ The Norfolk-Mary marriage plan remained a secret kept from Elizabeth over the spring and summer of 1569. The conspirators knew she would not agree to it, but at this point the plan was not treasonous.

Inevitably the marriage plans leaked out at the gossiping court, and became one of those secrets where everyone simultaneously knew everything and nothing about what was going on. The rumours were fuelled by astrological prophecies cast for interested parties, as everyone scrambled to discern the political future. In the spring and early summer of 1569, later evidence suggests, John Prestall's occult skills had been part of

⁴ Williams, *Thomas Howard*, p.146.

⁵ Alford, *The Early Elizabethan Polity*, p.201; Anthony Fletcher and Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Tudor Rebellions*, Harlow, 1968, 5th edition 2008, p.103.

Pembroke's attempts to gather political intelligence.⁶ Contemporary in the culture of Elizabethan England, astrology both provided a legitimate source of intelligence and a justification for action. All factions at Court turned to astrologers to determine how successful the conspiracy would be. There is no record of what Prestall's horoscope might have said, but one of the prophecies circulating in the county of Norfolk foretold 'it is concluded by Astronomy that the Scottish Damsell shalbe Quen, and the Duke the Husband', confirming the pre-ordained status of the marriage plan for the conspirators.⁷ After his arrest, in October 1569, Norfolk admitted to having 'sen above sixty such Prophecyes' but denied giving such 'folish Prophecies' any credence.⁸

Beyond providing astrological confirmation for the conspirator's planning, Prestall's involvement in the marriage plan conspiracy, like so much else about these events, remain unclear. In 1571 official propaganda charged Prestall with practicing a 'great treason with certayne persons, wherof one disclosed the same to the Duke of Norfolke, who also verye duetifullye reuealed the same to the Queenes Maiestie'.⁹ This probably refers to Leonard Dacre's plan to free Mary from Wingfield Manor in Derbyshire, which Norfolk initially tentatively approved.¹⁰ In August 1569 Dacre, accompanied by others probably including Prestall, demonstrated that Mary could be freed. This was shown by entering Wingfield's grounds and reportedly talking to Mary on the manor's roof.¹¹ This does seem excessively elaborate as Mary had relatively free movement to ride and hunt around the grounds at Wingfield, a luxury she did not enjoy

⁶ Anon, *A Copie of A letter: Lately sent by a Gentleman, Student in the Lawes of the Realm, to a Frende of his Concernyng D Story*, London, 1571, sigs. A3v.

⁷ Murdin, *A Collection of State Papers*, p.538.

⁸ Murdin, *A Collection of State Papers*, p.155.

⁹ Anon, *A Copie of A Letter*, sigs A3r-A3v.

¹⁰ Williams, *Thomas Howard*, p.158.

¹¹ Henry Summerson, 'Dacre, Leonard (d. 1573)', *ODNB*, 2008, [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/6994>].

either before or after. Upon hearing of the group's achievement, Norfolk advised against them going any further.¹² For reasons not recorded, shortly after the clandestine August visit to Mary, Prestall escaped across the Scottish border with Cecil's men in close pursuit. This suggests that Cecil had well placed informants inside the broader conspiracy, who knew more about Prestall's support for the plot than we can now observe from surviving available documents.

At the same time Prestall went to Scotland, the marriage plans started to unravel. In early August Elizabeth went on progress with her court. Pembroke remained in London, but Leicester and Norfolk were amongst the courtiers on progress. Cecil, informed of the threat to his position, alerted Elizabeth that something was in the air. Elizabeth reaffirmed her support for Cecil as Secretary of State, against all those who challenged his position. Elizabeth also saw the Norfolk-Mary marriage as a clear threat to herself, since Mary's strong claim to the English throne provided Elizabeth's opponents with a viable alternative.¹³ Elizabeth privately confronted Norfolk on progress, asking if he had anything to tell her, but his courage failed him and fearing her response he denied any plans were afoot.¹⁴ From the moment Elizabeth made it clear she would not abandon Cecil, Leicester had to decide on his cover story for Elizabeth to save his own neck.¹⁵ He either had to say he had infiltrated the conspiracy only to inform its activities to Elizabeth, or confront Elizabeth and divulge what had happened and that he had realised the error of his ways.

Leicester, choosing self-preservation, informed Elizabeth in detail of the marriage plan. Still the Queen's favourite, Leicester escaped her prolonged displeasure because of his timely bout of honesty, but Elizabeth and the court shunned Norfolk, who the Queen

¹² 'Dacre, Leonard', *ODNB*.

¹³ Fletcher and MacCulloch, *Tudor Rebellions*, p.103.

¹⁴ Williams, *Thomas Howard*, p.157 and Read, *Mr Secretary Cecil*, p.448.

¹⁵ K. J. Kesselring, *The Northern Rising of 1569*, p.38.

ordered to cease all correspondence with Mary. Isolated by Elizabeth's displeasure, Norfolk left the court without licence, riding to Pembroke's residence to discuss the situation. While with Pembroke he received two letters, the first from Elizabeth ordered his return to the court, now at Windsor, and the second shortly afterwards on 22 September from Leicester informing him that to return would mean his imprisonment.¹⁶ With this warning Norfolk made for his power base at Kenninghall, Norfolk. Once there he feigned a riding injury when the Queen ordered his return to court.¹⁷ She replied on 25 September, ordering him on his allegiance to return to explain himself, without delay or excuse. Heeding Elizabeth's command Norfolk rode south towards Windsor, but while *en route* he was apprehended and detained at St Albans on 2 October 1569, by men commissioned by Cecil to retrieve him and then transferred him to the Tower of London several days later.

Norfolk's arrest spooked the Northern Earls into action. Thomas Percy, seventh Earl of Northumberland and Charles Neville, sixth Earl of Westmorland, had been in contact with Norfolk, offering to rise in rebellious support for the Mary-Norfolk marriage. They resented the encroachments by the upstart Tudors on their ancient authority in the West March, in Northern England. As Catholics, Northumberland and Westmorland relished the possibility of replacing Elizabeth with Mary, Queen of Scots. Norfolk had refused their offer of help, but after his arrest Elizabeth ordered the Northern Earls to appear at court to explain themselves. In response they set out for London raising their army as they went. Both the Earls ostensibly supported the Norfolk-Mary as a means to secure the Catholic faith in England.¹⁸ But to this end there is evidence to suggest Northumberland thought the publicly Protestant Norfolk an unsuitable marriage

¹⁶ Williams, *Thomas Howard*, p.161.

¹⁷ Kesselring, *The Northern Rising of 1569*, p.37.

¹⁸ Fletcher and MacCulloch, *Tudor Rebellions*, p.103.

partner for Mary believing she should marry Philip of Spain, a true Catholic in his eyes.¹⁹ He supported the Norfolk-Mary marriage plan merely as the most convenient alternative to Elizabeth's rule.

Having gathered their forces the Earls swept south, with an advance party racing to free Mary, who was moved to the heavily fortified Coventry just in time.²⁰ The Northern Earls struggled to muster their own tenants but still collected a force of 3,200 foot soldiers and 1,500 horsemen as they marched.²¹ Initially very successful, they captured Durham, re-consecrating its cathedral for Rome on 14 November 1570. The rebellion revealed the thin façade of Tudor control in northern England. In response to the Northern threat, the Tudor government could originally only deploy 1,800 mounted knights and 4,000 men-at-arms.²² However, with 12,000 southern reinforcements, Elizabeth's regime soon crushed the rebellion, forcing the Earls and other leading rebels to flee across the Scottish border in late 1570.²³

Cecil took an interest in Prestall's activities in Scotland, especially his coining of alchemical gold, some of which he no doubt feared may flow back across the Scottish border to the impecunious Northumberland and Westmorland who had promised their followers they would be paid for their loyalty to the rising.²⁴ Educated in Aristotelian philosophy at Cambridge, and thus primed to believe in the theoretical possibility of transmutation, Cecil had spent several years from 1565 sponsoring Cornelius de Lannoy's attempts to transmute base metals into gold at Somerset House in London. As

¹⁹ Philip Hughes, *The Reformation in England*, III, London, 1954, p.268.

²⁰ After her brief stay at Wingfield Mary was transferred back to Tutbury.

²¹ Fletcher and MacCulloch, *Tudor Rebellions*, p.107.

²² William, *Later Tudors*, p.257.

²³ William, *Later Tudors*, p.257.

²⁴ Fletcher and MacCulloch, *Tudor Rebellions*, p.107.

late as 1568 he had tried to interest Elizabeth, herself a convinced believer in alchemy, in investing in another such scheme with an Italian alchemist.²⁵

While the rebellion was being suppressed, in Scotland Prestall spent most of his time in Dumfries and Galloway in the bordering Lowlands under the watchful eye of Cecil's men and Henry Lord Scrope, Warden of the West March. In Dumfries Prestall found favour with the sixteen-year-old John, Lord Maxwell, where as Scrope reported he 'Comonlye dothe dyne and suppe wyth the Lorde Maxwell att hys owne table'.²⁶ The Maxwells were a powerful Scottish Catholic family who saw Mary, Queen of Scots as the true monarch of Scotland and supported the Northern Earls in their cause. Despite Lord Maxwell's young age he had always been a diehard supporter of Mary, most likely due to the influence of his guardian Sir John Maxwell, Earl of Herries.²⁷ In May 1565 Thomas Randolph, the English ambassador to Scotland, wrote to Cecil outlining young Maxwell's unwavering support for Mary.²⁸ After Mary's removal from the Scottish throne in July 1568 Maxwell and a group of twenty-four noble Marian supporters wrote to the Duke of Alva seeking money to aid them in returning Mary to her throne.²⁹

According to reports reaching Lord Scrope at Carlisle, Prestall purchased Lord Maxwell's favour using his alchemical skills to 'coyne bothe golde and sylver'.³⁰ This arrangement put Prestall out of Cecil's reach. Coining for Maxwell removed the risk of any Scottish supporter of Mary handing him over to Cecil's men, but this potentially left him exposed to supporters of the infant King James VI who might curry favour by giving him to Cecil to spite Maxwell. Therefore to further reinforce his safety in Scotland,

²⁵ 'William Cecil to Sir Henry Norris, 1568', Quoted in Anon, *Cabala, Sive Scrinia Sacra: Mysteries of State and Government in Letters*, London, 1691, p.139.

²⁶ TNA SP 52/16 f.152v, Memoranda Concerning John Prestall, [29August] 1569.

²⁷ J. R. M. Sizer, 'Maxwell, John, earl of Morton (1553–1593)', *ODNB*, 2008, [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/18404>].

²⁸ TNA SP 52/10 f.104, Thomas Randolph to William Cecil, 21 May 1565.

²⁹ 'Maxwell, John, earl of Morton (1553–1593)', *ODNB*.

³⁰ TNA SP 59/16 f.79r, Lord Scrope to William Cecil, 29 August 1569.

Prestall obtained guarantees of safety from both James Stuart, Earl of Moray, Regent of Scotland for the young King James VI, and Moray's second in command, James Douglas fourth Earl of Morton.³¹ Prestall most probably achieved this by supplying both men with his coined alchemical gold and silver. In October when Lord Scrope wrote to Moray asking 'him ~~from~~ for thapprehencon and delyverie of Prestall gyving him to understande p[rese]ntlie where he is in secret kept', Moray rejected the request, suggesting that he considered whatever Prestall was doing in Scotland credible enough to risk annoying Cecil.³²

For his own self-preservation, Prestall had no compunction about playing both sides against the middle. He managed to collaborate with both sides in Scottish politics, and brought them together to secure his continuing liberty in Scotland relying on their avarice. Members of both Scotland's pro-Mary and pro-James factions obviously saw benefits in collaborating to ensure Prestall's valuable flow of alchemical gold. Lord Scrope considered the situation unusual enough to comment to Cecil 'that bothe the said Lo[rd] Maxwell and Cohill, are not onelie abedyent at the comannment and towardes the L[ord]. Regent, but also will be verie gladdes to do the thing that maye pleasure him in any respect'.³³

Maxwell and Moray should have loathed each other. Maxwell's guardian, Sir John Maxwell, fourth Lord of Herries had been imprisoned in Edinburgh Castle by Moray in April 1569 for supporting Mary and defending her against Moray's allegations at the enquiry into Mary's involvement in Darnley's murder.³⁴ However in October 1569

³¹ TNA SP 52/16 f.152r, Memoranda Concerning John Prestall, [29August] 1569; TNA SP 59/16 f.79r, Lord Scrope to Cecil, 29 August 1569.

³² TNA SP 59-16 f103r, Lord Scrope to Cecil, 25 October 1569.

³³ TNA SP 59/16 f.79r, Scrope to Cecil, 29 August 1569.

³⁴ BL Cotton MS Caligula CI f.506, Sir Henry Gate and Drury to Hunsdon. 26 January 1570; G. R. Hewitt, 'Maxwell, John, fourth Lord Herries of Terregles (c.1512–1583)', *ODNB*, 2008, [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/18403>].

Moray visited Dumfries, perhaps partly to visit Prestall and his coining operation at Maxwell's estate in Dumfries.³⁵

Cecil could not get cooperation from anyone in Scotland to extract Prestall back to England, with both sides protecting him. That must have frustrated Cecil enormously with Prestall tantalisingly just out of reach but still so close to the border. So with northern England ablaze, the Scots uncooperative on the matter of Prestall, and agents diligently documenting Prestall's itinerant routine Cecil seriously considered a cross border raid to apprehend him.³⁶ It would have been a 'rendition', to use the modern term, by the Elizabethan security apparatus of an English subject from a foreign country, and vividly demonstrates the degree to which Cecil viewed Prestall as a national security threat. He was willing to consider rocking the diplomatic boat, by snatching Prestall away from a normally supportive Protestant Scottish regime.

Other than his coining, Prestall's actions at Dumfries, in Maxwell's house, remain murky. Clearly the attention Cecil gave Prestall, while the North of England was in violent rebellion, suggests that Cecil had information about Prestall's connection with the rebels. Another clue for Cecil's obsessive interest in Prestall comes from print propaganda organised around the treason trial of the Catholic exile Dr John Story two years later. Drawing on Story's confessions, the anonymous author accused Prestall of having 'joyned hym selfe with the Englyshe rebelles and there [Scotland] attempted sundry treasons against her maiestie'.³⁷

Cecil never executed his planned raid for Prestall's abduction, because the political landscape shifted in Scotland when Moray was murdered on 23 January 1570. As Cecil mulled over how to abduct Prestall from Scottish soil, Scrope wrote to him on

³⁵ TNA SP 59/16 f.103r, Scrope to Cecil, 25 October 1569.

³⁶ TNA SP 59/16 f.103r, Scrope to Cecil, 25 October 1569.

³⁷ Anon, *A Copie of Letters*, sig. A3v.

12 January 1570 with details of rebel movements inside the Scottish borders and informed Cecil that he had again written to Moray asking him to expel Prestall.³⁸ Scrope did not receive a reply from Morey before he was assassinated at Linlithgow. Moray's assassin James Hamilton of Bothwellhaugh, an extremist supporter of Mary, may have been known to Prestall. The English regime linked Prestall to involvement in arranging for Hamilton to shoot Moray.³⁹ The English account of John Story's treason claimed that Prestall had written to Story, before Moray's death, urging 'that yf the Regent and the foolyshe boy the young Kyng were dispatched and dead, the Scottyshe Queene were a mariage for the best man lyvyng.'⁴⁰

On 26 January 1570 Sir Henry Gater and Sir William Drury, both sent to Scotland to negotiate with Moray, before his death, for the handover of English rebels in Scotland, wrote to Lord Hunsdon, President of the Council of the North, to report on the situation after the assassination.⁴¹ Cecil no doubt had a hand in their instructions, and it is noticeable that amongst their points they state that 'Prestall is in Flanders and from thence it is thought [he] will returne againe unto Scotland'.⁴² Prestall's rapid departure was seen as connected to Moray's murder by his contemporaries, whose world-view discounted any possibility of coincidence when viewing threats to national security. Though it is plausible Prestall's departure was unrelated to Moray's murder, it is unlikely and we cannot know with any certainty either way.

In the Netherlands Prestall's subversive reputation preceded him and ensured that he was welcomed by the English Catholic exile community as a die-hard opponent of Elizabeth and her Protestant faith. Having written to Story from Scotland, he met him

³⁸ TNA SP 59/16 f.153r, Scrope to Cecil, 12 January 1570.

³⁹ Anon, *A Copie of A Letter*, sig. B2v.

⁴⁰ Anon, *A Copie of A Letter*, sig. A4v.

⁴¹ BL Cotton MS Caligula CI ff.506r-506v, Gate and Drury to Hunsdon, 26 January 1570.

⁴² BL Cotton MS Caligula CI f.506r, Gate and Drury to Hunsdon. 26 January 1570.

personally for the first time. Prestall's relationship with Story was complex and it was Prestall's arrival in the Netherlands that led to Story's undoing. Story introduced Prestall to the Duke of Alva, the Spanish Governor of the Netherlands, who like Story was intrigued by Prestall's claims and reputation to possess occult powers.⁴³

Story, a married canon lawyer, was notorious for his strong objections to the Protestant faith. He vaulted to notoriety during the reign of Mary I when as Regius Professor of Civil Law at Oxford, he proved one of Mary's most active prosecutors in the trials of Protestant heretics.⁴⁴ After Elizabeth's accession, Story refused to compromise with heresy. At Elizabeth's first Parliament in 1559 Story stood up in the Commons and decried Elizabeth's Act of Supremacy, trumpeting Catholic supremacy. He told the House of Commons, Mary's prosecutors had wasted their time 'chopping at twiges, but I wished to have chopped at the roote', indicating those around him who would vote Elizabeth's religious settlement into force.⁴⁵ In May 1560 he was imprisoned in the Fleet Prison 'for having obstinately refused attendance on public worship, and everywhere declaiming and railing against that religion which we now profess'.⁴⁶ Cecil suspected that Story was involved with the Waldegrave Mass circle before his imprisonment, but could not find sufficient proof.⁴⁷ Story repeatedly refused the Oath of Supremacy, which caused the Privy Council to consider executing him on that alone.⁴⁸

⁴³ Anon, *A Copie of A Letter*, sig. A2r; TNA SP 12/238 ff. 104r-105r, The Examination of William Kynnersley, 8 March 1591; TNA SP 12/238 ff. 109r 110r, The Voluntary Deposition of Margrey Kynnersley, 16 March 1591. (in the Kynnersley depositions they call it the Spanish Court but they mean Alva's Court in the Netherlands.)

⁴⁴ 'Story, John', *ODNB*.

⁴⁵ Anon, *A Declaration of the Lyfe and Death of John Story*, London, 1571, sig. B1r; Simond D'Ewes, *The Journals of all the Parliaments During the Reign of Queen Elizabeth: Both for the House of Lords and House of Commons*, London, 1682, p.52.

⁴⁶ 'Story, John', *ODNB*.

⁴⁷ TNA SP 12/17 ff.37r-38r, The effect of all that was Done for the Q[ueen's] Majesties at the last Commission of Oyer [and Determiner] at Brentwoode [Essex] the third of June Anno Regina Eliz[abeth] tertio, 3 June 1561.

⁴⁸ 'Story, John', *ODNB*.

Story escaped again, and helped by the Spanish ambassador reached the Spanish Netherlands. His claim, when he returned to England as a prisoner in 1571 that he had ‘departed this realme freelye licensed therunto by the queene, who accompted mee an abject and castawaye’, seems unsupported by the surviving evidence.⁴⁹ In the Netherlands, under Alva’s protection, Story took an oath for Spanish naturalisation in Louvain in 1564 and procured a pension from King Philip.⁵⁰ He was also appointed a customs searcher seeking out heretical materials being transported through Antwerp.⁵¹ Apart from his duties as a searcher, Story became little more than an embittered old man, seen by the English authorities as a beacon attracting the exiled Northern rebels because of his strong beliefs and past activities. However with Prestall’s arrival Story began to conspire against Elizabeth I aided by Prestall and other exiles.⁵²

In the Netherlands Prestall and Story schemed together about assassinations and invasions. They planned how to make Mary, Queen of Scots, Queen of England by first restoring her to Scotland. They intended to murder James VI because as Prestall told Story ‘the Scottes woulde hardlye be reduced to obedience as the Queene of Scottes was without an husbände, and no man of estimation woulde haue her so long as the boy lyved’.⁵³ Once assassinated, the conspirators hoped King Philip or his brother, Don Jon of Austria, would marry Mary, ensuring a Catholic succession and re-forging the dynastic ties to the Habsburgs which had been created with Mary I’s marriage to Philip. Prestall and Story planned for an invasion of Scotland by Alva with 6,000 to 8,000 Swiss troops coinciding with the assassination.⁵⁴ Once in Scotland, they discussed contingencies for invading England from Scotland. These contingencies involved using

⁴⁹ Anon, *Declaration*, sig. B4r.

⁵⁰ Story, John’, *ODNB*

⁵¹ HoP *Commons*, 1509-155, p.388; HoP *Commons*, 1558-1603, p.452.

⁵² Anon, *Declaration*, sig. B4v.

⁵³ Anon, *A Copie of A Letter*, sig. B2v.

⁵⁴ TNA SP 70/111 f.58v, John Marsh to Cecil, [11] April 1570.

magic to assassinate Elizabeth I, Cecil and Sir Nicholas Bacon, clearing the way for Mary, Queen of Scots to become Queen of Britain.⁵⁵

On 17 March 1570 Story delivered a letter from Alva to Prestall concerning one of his associates, Sir John Conway. On receiving the letter Prestall hastily departed from Antwerp bound for Scotland. Prestall had purchased ‘a chest of iron tools which will break any prison, be it never so strong’ to spring Sir John Conway from prison by conveying the tools to him.⁵⁶ Prestall declared he would set Conway ‘at liberty or else lose his life’.⁵⁷ Very little is known of Conway’s life between his knighthood in 1559 and 1573 when he received a licence to go overseas. The reason for his imprisonment is unknown, but he was considered an unpleasant character. A client of Leicester’s, in 1579 he tried to claim the confiscated land of fugitives who had fled abroad.⁵⁸ Then in 1583 he was briefly imprisoned in connection with the Somerville-Arden case when he claimed John Somerville had told him he intended to kill the queen.⁵⁹ Conway three years later was out of prison and accompanied Leicester on his military campaign to the Netherlands in 1586.

Three weeks after Prestall departed Antwerp, on 11 April, John Marsh, Cecil’s chief agent the Spanish Netherlands, the Governor of the Merchant Adventurers, reported a ‘reliable advertisement from an expres messenger that Prestall tooke shipping at Camphre [Veere] in the Easter week by the name Max’ leaving for Scotland.⁶⁰ The fate of

⁵⁵ TNA SP 70/111 f.58v, Marsh to Cecil, [11] April 1570.

⁵⁶ HMC *Salisbury*, I, p.466, n.1479: John Lee to Sir Wm. Cecil, 20 March 1569-70.

⁵⁷ HMC *Salisbury*, I, p.646, n.1479: Lee to Cecil, 20 March 1569-70.

⁵⁸ BL Lansdowne MS 69, f.175v, Claims on Fugitives lands, 1579.

⁵⁹ M. A. Stevens, ‘Conway, Sir John (*d.* 1603)’, *ODNB*, 2008, [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/6123>].

⁶⁰ TNA SP 70/111 f.58v, Marsh to Cecil, [11] April 1570. Easter Sunday 1570 was 26 March. Camphre is now called Veere. It is a port on the Veerse Meer, in the Province of Zeeland. Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries Veere was the primary port of entry and exit for trade flows to Scotland.

Conway is unknown, but Marsh reported Prestall returned to Alva's Court on 15 April to brief him on Scotland.⁶¹ Prestall and Alva's meeting occurred behind closed doors but Marsh noted after the meeting that Prestall disliked the answer he received and 'he fretes marvelously' about it.⁶²

As well as attempting to spring Conway from gaol, while in Scotland, Prestall probably intended to meet with Maxwell and others from the pro-Mary faction. Although Marsh did not know what Prestall and Alva discussed it is a fair assumption that Prestall urged Alva to militarily support the Catholic Scottish nobles in the civil war that had broken out after Moray's assassination. If Alva used the plan that Prestall and Story had devised, supporting the Scottish Catholics would provide a platform to invade England via Scotland once the pro-James faction was crushed.

While Prestall was in Scotland he would have seen Maxwell and the other pro-Mary nobles preparing for the English forces amassing on the border to cross into Scotland to support James. On 18 April they entered Scotland under Lord Scrope and Simon Musgrave, Master of the Horse, on an incursion that burnt a swathe up to Maxwell's land around Dumfries.⁶³ The expedition was intended to punish Maxwell's harbouring of the northern rebels, in particular Leonard Dacre, who had attempted a second rising in February before fleeing North.⁶⁴

The day after Prestall went to report at Alva's Court, John Marsh dispatched a coded letter to Cecil naming 'ij English Spyes more one named Nicholas Good servant to Lord Bedford as he saith, the other John Antony late servant to the Duke of Norfolk /

⁶¹ TNA SP 70/111 ff. 70v-71r, John Marsh to Cecil, 16 April 1570. It is interesting to note that the cipher symbol used for Prestall in Marsh's ciphered letter is a gallows.

⁶² TNA SP 70/111 f.71r, Marsh to Cecil, 16 April 1570.

⁶³ Kesselring, *The Northern Rebellion of 1569*, pp.105-108.

⁶⁴ Kesselring, *The Northern Rebellion of 1569*, p.108.

which shall go into Scotland and so into England'.⁶⁵ Prestall had given Marsh these names of English Catholic spies, through a mutual associate rather through direct contact while at Alva's Court. Marsh's letter went on to urge the importance of maintaining the discourse with Prestall because as Marsh hoped 'to discover all their enterprises and to bring the ships which are intended for Scotland and the traytors also into your power'.⁶⁶

Prestall's informing against his fellow Catholic exiles warrants special attention, because it contradicts his religious and political behaviour. However at the same time it is very much in keeping with his mercenary approach to his own welfare at the expense of others. The exiled community in the Spanish Netherlands was a hive of informants all informing on one another. Once in exile many English Catholics lived in abject poverty, and sought to escape their miserable life there by informing on their fellow fugitives in the hope of being granted a licence for their safe return to England. The last time Prestall had found himself stranded in exile in 1563-64, he wrote directly to Cecil and Leicester beseeching them to be allowed back to England. However this time he did not expect mercy, especially from Cecil. Instead Prestall began informing through Cecil's agents in the Netherlands, to gradually build up his credibility and, he hoped, eventually earn his passage back to England.

It seems unrealistic to consider Prestall as an *agent provocateur*, planted to draw Story into treasonous activities that Cecil could turn into political capital.⁶⁷ This interpretation, put forward by historian Ronald Pollitt, ignores Cecil's plan to pluck Prestall out of his Scottish sanctuary in 1569.⁶⁸ It is more likely, based on his previous actions, that Prestall became a self-appointed double agent, both conspiring and

⁶⁵ TNA SP 70/111 f.71r, Marsh to Cecil, 16 April 1570.

⁶⁶ TNA SP 70/111 f.71r, Marsh to Cecil, 16 April 1570.

⁶⁷ Pollitt, 'The Abduction of Doctor John Story', p.138.

⁶⁸ Pollitt's argument here is summarised Haynes who also does not address Prestall's Scottish sojourn. Haynes, *The Elizabeth Secret Service*, pp.2-3.

informing on conspiracies, playing both sides, while seeking out the best opportunities for his own self-interest. His status in the exile community certainly provided an ideal base for intelligence gathering. Prestall's key motive while in exile in the 1570s resembled that of 1564, to use any means to improve his situation and return England. In 1570 Prestall had more options because the Northern Rising rebels who had escaped to Scotland now joined the already substantial Catholic exile community in the Spanish Netherlands. They had a strong desire to renew the rebellion by invading from the Netherlands with foreign Catholic support.

On 21 July 1570 Sir Henry Neville, an official in the Tower of London responsible for Norfolk's detention, reported to Cecil that the Spanish ambassador, Guerau de Spes, had received information Prestall had secretly written to Cecil.⁶⁹ Neville had learnt that de Spes had heard that Prestall corresponded with Cecil under the cover-name of one of his fellow exiles, Thomas Martinfield, and Cecil replied under the pen name of Sir John Conway.⁷⁰ Neville warned Cecil that if Prestall was really part of any 'such a service' there were now rumours of it circulating around the Court in London.⁷¹

The validity of Neville's claim is questionable. When he wrote to warn Cecil, Martinfield was in the Netherlands conspiring with Prestall. Sir John Conway had vanished after Prestall's March 1570 venture to spring him from a Scottish prison. It is plausible Prestall and Cecil could have corresponded and escaped detection by using pen aliases if Prestall could intercept the letters destined for Martinfield, and withdraw his secret correspondence before it reached Martinfield. A plausible act due to Martinfield and Prestall's close association, but very dependent on circumstances for whether or not

⁶⁹ HMC *Salisbury*, I, p.476, n.1505, Sir Henry Nevell [Neville] to Sir William Cecil, 21 July 1570.

⁷⁰ HMC *Salisbury*, I, p.476, n.1505, Nevell [Neville] to Cecil, 21 July 1570.

⁷¹ HMC *Salisbury*, I, p.476, n.1505, Nevell [Neville] to Cecil, 21 July 1570.

Prestall was caught. De Spes does not mention this exchange of letters in his dispatches.⁷² One would assume that if he did know Prestall was a viper in the exile's nest he would have notified Alva or King Philip. Neville's message to Cecil does however provide an insight into Prestall's world of Elizabethan espionage, where no one was fully trusted by anyone, and rumours of a rumour warranted attention.

Despite having initially quashed the Mary-Norfolk marriage plans, Cecil's position, like England's, remained fragile. Elizabeth's reprisal against the crushed rebels was savage. She oversaw a traitor's death for 450 rebels.⁷³ They were executed by hanging, then cut down while still alive and disembowelled in public spectacles of terror. This total was three times greater than the numbers executed by Henry VIII after the Pilgrimage of Grace in 1536, a rising many times larger than the Northern Rising.⁷⁴ Cecil sought to gather public support by further publicising the risk domestic and foreign Catholicism posed to England, and in doing so undermine Elizabeth's confidence in his opponents at Court and in Council who supported Mary Queen of Scots. By mid 1570 Cecil had found just what he was looking for in a single figure, Dr John Story.

Cecil perceived Prestall and Story's plotting as a real threat, and Story's presence at Alva's Court as a rallying point for the growing number of English Catholic exiles. Cecil decided that this threat could not stand and planned to eliminate the source of conspiring against Elizabeth. Cecil chose to abduct Story, as the highest value target, and return him to England to stand trial, rather than have him assassinated in the Netherlands. Cecil, as master of the Elizabethan espionage network at the time, commissioned John Marsh to coordinate the planning and execution of the kidnapping. Marsh, along with another of Cecil's merchant informers, John Lee, devised a simple

⁷² *CSP Spanish, 1568-1579*, p. 257, ns.196-197. There are no entries between 2 July 1570 and 26 July 1570.

⁷³ Penry Williams, *The Later Tudors*, p.258.

⁷⁴ Fletcher and MacCulloch, *Tudor Rebellions*, p.28-53.

plan that used Story's devotion to his task of rooting out Protestant literature as customs searcher to lure and capture him.⁷⁵ Marsh employed Roger Ramsden, Martin Bragge and Simon Jewkes to carry out Story's capture. Crucially, he recruited William Parker, an English exile, and Story's fellow customs searcher, who was willing to betray Story in exchange for a safe return to England.⁷⁶ The first attempt to snatch Story in Antwerp fell through, but did not arouse Story's suspicions or expose the abductor.⁷⁷ On their second attempt Parker informed Story about a vessel arriving at the Dutch port of Bergen-op-Zoom, allegedly carrying contraband Protestant books. On the 8 August 1570, Story and Parker boarded the vessel, and when Story went below deck to search for the illicit cargo the abductors immediately sailed for Yarmouth with their captive.⁷⁸

Once in England Cecil put Story in the Tower to await the next Parliament, when he would use Story's plotting with Prestall to justify a new treason law, whose first victim would be Story. Prestall's role in Story's abduction remains ambiguous. No direct evidence survives about his activities in late July and early August 1570. However Ronald Pollitt has claimed that Prestall was 'deeply involved in the kidnapping' and that he 'probably supplied information' to Roger Ramsden, one of the kidnapers.⁷⁹ Unfortunately Pollitt cites no evidence, though given the nature of Elizabethan espionage this is hardly surprising.

Prestall's reputation, as a staunch supporter of Mary, Queen of Scots, would certainly have provided excellent cover for betraying Story, if he was involved and no doubt increased his favour with Cecil and his attempt to return to England. Henry

⁷⁵ Pollitt, 'The Abduction of Doctor John Story', p.141; Conyers Read, *Lord Burghley and Queen Elizabeth*, London, 1960, reprinted 1954, p.142.

⁷⁶ Pollitt, 'The Abduction of Doctor John Story', p.146.

⁷⁷ Longleat House, MS DU III/109, 'A petition from the kidnapers of Dr John Story concerning the costs incurred during the kidnapping'.

⁷⁸ Anon, *A Copie of Letters*, sigs. B2v-B3r.

⁷⁹ Pollitt, 'The Abduction of Doctor John Story', p.143.

Cobham, English ambassador to Alva's Court, wrote to Cecil about Story's abduction on 18 August 1570, advising him that 'If the manner of the convayans of Store had been kept secret in England or yet hereafter shalbe well caried, I thinke ther is w^{ch} will hasard to doo the lyke enterprise so by Prestaule'.⁸⁰ In fact Cobham assured Cecil they had abducted the wrong man because 'the chefe captainie of thes w^{ch} are bvsy in practises is Prestall, Store was next'.⁸¹

In the following months after Story's abduction Prestall continued to scheme with the most notorious exiles in Flanders. On 31 August 1570 he visited one Lord Morley's house in Bruges where he consulted with the Countess of Northumberland, the driving force behind her husband's involvement in the Northern Rising, and Lord Seton, a Scottish Lord, who with Maxwell had helped Mary, Queen of Scots escape from Lochleven in May 1568.⁸² Cobham advised Cecil he had been informed that the group meeting at Morley's house discussed plans for Scotland but he knew no details of their plans, so he urged Cecil to interrogate Story for 'In the mean tyme Store can enforme what practises Prestaull hathe in hand for Scotland'.⁸³ Despite Cobham's concern for Prestall as England's true danger, Prestall disappears from diplomatic and intelligence correspondence until January 1571.

Prestall spent some of that time in Scotland where the pro-Mary faction had experienced some success. Lord Maxwell's former guardian, Lord Herries, had captured Edinburgh and the civil war looked briefly to be favouring Mary's supporters. On 26 January 1571 John Lee, who had replaced Marsh as Cecil's chief agent observed the English exiles activities, informed Cecil about Prestall's return to the Netherlands.⁸⁴ Lee

⁸⁰ TNA SP 70/114 f.4r-4v, Cobham to Cecil, 4 September 1570.

⁸¹ TNA SP 70/114 f.4v, Cobham to Cecil, 4 September 1570.

⁸² TNA SP 70/114 f.4r, Cobham to Cecil, 4 September 1570.

⁸³ TNA SP 70/114 f.4v, Cobham to Cecil, 4 September 1570.

⁸⁴ Anon, *A Copie of A Letter*, sig, B3v.

whose correspondence with Cecil seems to have been widely known, reported that Prestall's Scottish visit had left him well inclined to the Queen, meaning Elizabeth, and that Prestall awaited an audience with Alva to brief him on the Scottish situation.⁸⁵ Prestall however gave a very different impression to another merchant informer, William Fitzwilliam, who wrote to Cecil six days later, stating that after Prestall's meeting with Alva, Prestall's 'hed is as fowll of devysses as ever it was / suche as he can fynd to be of his faxtyon and umar [humor] shall lack no p[er]suationes to doo ev[i]ll'.⁸⁶ As always, Prestall was playing both sides of the conflict.

In January 1571 Prestall approached Lee as a Spanish speaker asking him to write a letter to Alva's secretary Courteville.⁸⁷ Lee informed Cecil of Prestall's request before Lee met with Prestall to pen his letter, promising to notify Cecil of the letter's contents. Unfortunately that follow-up letter did not survive but the letter was probably a request for a pension from Alva. The English Catholics in exile lived in relative destitution and many applied to Alva for a pension to alleviate the hardship. The leading Northern rebels, such as Martinfield and Norton who fled to the Netherlands had received pensions from Courteville, and perhaps Prestall thought he would try his luck.⁸⁸

By March 1571, Prestall had not received a pension and had begun to become an irritant amongst his fellow Catholic exiles in the Netherlands. In February, Fitzwilliam had reported Prestall to be in an upbeat mode, but by early March Lee believed that Prestall 'ys not had [in] so good lykyng (as yt ys reported) [or] as he loked for'.⁸⁹ His ebbing popularity amongst the Catholic exiles can be contributed to his apparent obsession with Scotland, although this fed Cecil's deepest fears about Scotland providing

⁸⁵ TNA SP 15/20 f.9v, John Lee to William Cecil 26 January 1571.

⁸⁶ TNA SP 70/116 f.59r, John Fitzwilliam to Cecil, 1 February 1571.

⁸⁷ TNA SP 15/20 f.9v, Lee to Cecil, 26 January 1571.

⁸⁸ Anon, *A Copie of A Letter*, sig. B4v.

⁸⁹ TNA SP 12/20 f.31r, John Lee to William Cecil, 8 March 1571.

a launch pad for a Catholic invasion of England. After returning from Scotland several months before, Prestall had attended Alva's Court several times, insisting that Alva should support the Catholic pro-Mary faction. Lee told Cecil (now Lord Burghley) 'hys hole dvyse, was to persuade that Scoytlande lay more necessary for the Kynge of Spayne than yt dyd for the frenche Kynge, and how that yt was as easy a course by seay frome some partes of Scoytland yn to Spayne as yt was yn to France, and that yt myght bee kepte to the Kynges use, wythe the garryson of towe thowsande ^shottes^ and fyve hundered horsse'.⁹⁰ In some ways Prestall seemed to be acting as spokesman for the pro-Mary faction, continuing their campaign for Alva's support with the letter sent by Maxwell and the other pro-Mary Scottish Lords in 1568.

Lee continued to paint Prestall's situation in the bleakest terms, assuring Burghley that Prestall had slowly isolated himself from within the English exile community. On 1 May 1571 Lee wrote to Burghley with news that 'Prestauill, remainethe here [Antwerp] very secretly, and none doythe repayre unto hym, but leonard daces, and hys men', but also suggested Prestall was still scheming over Scotland, 'that very secretly hys man ys late returned out of Scoytlande'.⁹¹ With no sign of a pension and probably accruing debts, as he did everywhere, Prestall appears to have continued scheming over Scotland and Mary, Queen of Scots' fate. Sending his unnamed servant to act as his agent in Scotland he gives the impression of planning to 'plot' his way back into the exile community's favour with a workable plan to invade England through Scotland while supporting the pro-Mary Scots.

Prestall's standing in the exile community was waning and he may have further ingratiated himself with Lord Burghley by passing information that helped Burghley to

⁹⁰ TNA SP 15/20 f. 31r, Lee to Cecil, 8 March 1571.

⁹¹ TNA SP 15/20 f. 66r, John Lee to Burghley, 1 May 1571.

unravel the Ridolfi Plot.⁹² Lee gives no specifics on Prestall's 'vindictive act' but Prestall may have notified Burghley of the imminent arrival of Charles Bailly, Roberto di Ridolfi's courier to England. Ridolfi, a Florentine banker, had been arrested in England in 1569 on suspicion of providing funds at the end of 1569 to the Northern rebels. He was briefly questioned by Walsingham then released.⁹³

After his release at the end of 1569 Ridolfi had returned to continental Europe to co-ordinate a conspiracy to overthrow Elizabeth. He had gained enthusiastic papal support but only tacit Spanish support. Bailly, acting as the go between for Ridolfi and those conspiring in England, was secretary to John Leslie, Bishop of Ross, chaplain to Mary, Queen of Scots, and her representative in London while she was in captivity.

On 12 April, after Parliament had been sitting for ten days, Bailly arrived at Dover and Burghley's men were waiting to make a 'fortuitous' arrest. In his possession officials found copies of a contraband book, the Papal Bull excommunicating Elizabeth and ciphered letters destined for Leslie.⁹⁴ Burghley used the opportunity of Bailly's arrest to secure his position against the regrouping Norfolk supporters at court. Unable to crack the cipher in the letter Burghley pressured Bailly to supply the details of the Catholic plot he was certain the letters contained. Burghley planted William Herle, one of his key intelligence operators, in prison with Bailly to learn his secrets, initially to no avail because Herle merely aroused Bailly's suspicions.⁹⁵ Burghley then used the fact that Bailly never had met Story, employing William Parker to impersonate Story and persuade Bailly to confess the details of the Ridolfi Plot.⁹⁶ According to Burghley, this

⁹² TNA SP 15/20 f. 220v, John Lee to Lord Burghley, 9 November 1571. The rest of this manuscript concerns the Ridolfi Plot and 'Rudolph[']s [Ridolfi]' actions.

⁹³ L. E. Hunt, 'Ridolfi, Roberto di (1531–1612)', *ODNB*, 2008, [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/23634>].

⁹⁴ Edwards, *Plots and Plotters*, p.38.

⁹⁵ Haynes, *The Elizabethan Secret Service*, pp.7-8.

⁹⁶ J.A. Froude, *History of England from the Fall of Wolsey to the Defeat of the*

involved the standard elements, beginning with the marriage of Norfolk and Mary Queen of Scots, who would replace Elizabeth after her assassination. Both events would coincide with an invasion of England by Alva from the Netherlands and a revolt stirred up by Catholic gentry in the West Country.⁹⁷ Several weeks later Burghley coupled Bailly's confession with a statement he had coerced from Leslie after his arrest in May, and the now deciphered letters implicating Bailly, Leslie, Ridolfi, Norfolk, Mary and De Spes. Drawing all this together the picture before Burghley was one of a serious Catholic threat to Protestant England that had to be countered. Thus his use of Dr John Story to highlight the merging of English and foreign Catholic threats reinforced Cecil's argument that Norfolk's removal as a potential marriage partner to Mary, Queen of Scots was very timely.

In Middlesex in May 1571, an indictment was filed against a group of Prestall and Story's fellow fugitives: Richard Norton, Thomas Martinfield, Christopher Nevell, Francis Norton and Thomas Jenney (alias Jennyunges) for conspiring against Elizabeth I.⁹⁸ The indictment accused the group of capturing the Castle of York on 16 November 1569 and holding it until Elizabeth's forces retook the castle, when they fled to Antwerp where they 'conspired, compassed and imagined' Elizabeth's death.⁹⁹ The indictment also charged Prestall, Story and William Parker of conspiring with the group, on 24 and 25 June and then again on 4 July 1570, planning for the invasion of England to depose Elizabeth.¹⁰⁰ However, except for Story and Parker, all those indicted were in exile beyond the reach of the indictment. The indictment was filed as a pre-cursor to Story's trial to capture public attention.

Spanish Armada, Vol. X, London, 1870, p.218, Edwards, *The Marvellous Chance*, p.78. Edwards assumes the Story impersonator was William Herle, overlooking that Bailly knew Herle.

⁹⁷ Haynes, *The Elizabethan Secret Service*, p.11.

⁹⁸ TNA SP 12/77 ff. 155v-156r, Indictment of Richard Norton and others, May 1571. Calendared incorrectly as April 1571.

⁹⁹ TNA SP 12/77 ff.157v-158r, Indictment of Richard Norton and others, May 1571.

¹⁰⁰ TNA SP 12/77 ff.161v-162r, Indictment of Richard Norton and others, May 1571.

The Middlesex indictment opened the way for John Story's trial which lasted a single day on 26 May 1571 at Westminster Hall before the King's Bench. Story defended himself, that as a naturalised Spanish subject the King's Bench lacked jurisdiction over him. Story did however plead *nihil dicit* (nothing to say) and the judges promptly pronounced him guilty of committing 'constructive' treason and sentenced him to a traitor's death.¹⁰¹ Although Story had been convicted under a broad indictment against the Northern rebels in the Easter Term of 1571, his conviction came under the new 1571 treason legislation that stated anyone who:

Shall wthn the Realme or wthoute, compasse imagyn invent devyse or intend the Deathe or Destruccion or any bodely harme tending to Death Destruccion Mayme or Wounding of the Royall P[er]son of the same our Sovaigne Ladye Queene Elizabeth; or to deprive or depose her of or from the Stile Honor or Kyngly Name of the Ymperiall Crowne of this Realme or of anny other Realme or Domynyon to her Ma^{tes} belonging; or to levye Warre agaynst her Ma^{tie} wthn the Realme or wthoute, or to move or to sturre any forreyners or strangers wth Force to invade this Realme or the Realme of Irelande or anny other her Ma^{tes} Domynions being under her Ma^{tes} Obeysaunce ... shalbe deemed declared and adjudged Traytors to the Queene and Realme, and shall suffer paynes of Death and also forfaitte unto the Queenes Ma^{te} her Heires and Successors, all and singuler Landes Tenementes and Hereditamentes Goodes and Chattels, as in the cases of High Treason by the Lawes and Statutes of this Realme at this daye of Ryght ought to be forfaitted and loste.¹⁰²

This treason law was the first piece of legislation Parliament debated in the 1571 Parliamentary session. The Treason Act targeted the Papist rebels in England and abroad whose threat Burghley believed was constantly present and perpetually on the verge of being unleashed, as the Northern Rising had starkly demonstrated. Burghley thus repeated his 1563 tactics, when he had tried his captive Catholic conspirators during Parliament's sitting to reinforce the need for anti-Catholic witchcraft laws. Staging Story's trial on 26 May 1571 reminded the sitting Parliamentarians of the Popish plots against England. Burghley engineered the anti-Catholic atmosphere in Parliament in

¹⁰¹ 'Story, John', *ODNB*.

¹⁰² SR, 1547-1585, pp.526-528, 13 Eliz I. c.1: 'An Acte Whereby Certayne Offences bee Made Treason'.

order to pressure Elizabeth into signing the Duke of Norfolk's death warrant, a signature that she had refused to give several times previously.

On 1 June 1571 Story was executed at Tyburn before a baying crowd.¹⁰³ His execution coincided with populist propaganda orchestrated by Burghley to whip up popular feeling against Norfolk, and emphasise the wicked activities of Story and his fellow exiles. A number of popular publications were licensed for printing in early July 1571 to coincide with Story's execution.¹⁰⁴ Those that survive highlighted how Story and his fellow exiles had 'conspire, compasse and Imagin the Queenes death, and her high-nes to depose and depryve' referring to the 1571 indictment.¹⁰⁵ *A Copie of A Letter: Lately sent by a Gentleman, Student in the Lawes of the Realm, to a Frende of his Concernyng D[r] Story* (1571), which draws from Story's own confession, puts the wicked and deviant Prestall on a par with the traitor, Story. According to this publication Prestall and Story planned to use violence or, if necessary, Prestall's occult powers, against Elizabeth I if she refused to convert to Catholicism. Supposedly, Prestall told Story 'that he had an art to poison any body a farre of beyng not present with them and none coulde do it but he.'¹⁰⁶ They also discussed the invasion of England and that 'the [Northern] rebellion shoule be renewed in Englande and at the same instant also Irelande should rebel.'¹⁰⁷ All acts that Prestall and Story probably discussed, being drawn from Story's confession, strongly reflect Burghley's concerns of a foreign invasion led by exiles and supported by the Catholic powers of Europe.

¹⁰³ John Story was the first person recorded to be hanged with the triangular gallows known as the "Tyburn Tree".

¹⁰⁴ The Three publications are: Anon, *A Copie of A Letter*; Anon, *Declaration*; and John Cornet, *An Admonition to Doctor Story Beeing*, London, 1571.

¹⁰⁵ Anon, *Declaration* sig. B4v.

¹⁰⁶ Anon, *A Copie of Letters*, sig. A4r.

¹⁰⁷ Anon, *A Copie of Letters*, sig. B1r.

Ironically, Prestall may have welcomed these accusations, because in the Netherlands the English exile community was trying to root out informants. John Lee informed Burghley that Richard Norton and William Saunders had confronted him because they knew he had divulged to Burghley the happenings at Parker's house before Story's abduction.¹⁰⁸ Similar suspicions may have been circulating about Prestall's role in the abduction. In response to the publication of *A Copie of A Letter: Lately sent by a Gentleman, Student in the Lawes of the Realm, to a Frende of his Concernyng D Story* (1571) and *A Declaration of the Lyfe and Death of John Story* (1571), Lee also told Burghley that 'Prastuall', still isolated from the rest of the community, 'was yn good hope that the late prynted boyke concernynge Storyes examynatyon wold have somewhat reuyued hys credet, wyche not wythe stayndynge byethe ded'.¹⁰⁹ Prestall's hopes were dashed when the publication received a hollow response in the Netherlands. Lee then took the opportunity to approach him through a merchant Lee considered reliable and who knew Prestall, in the hope he could persuade him to stop his plotting against Elizabeth and instead just continue informing.¹¹⁰ Prestall, down and out, tried to give the impression he was well inclined to Elizabeth, and that he had information with which to buy Burghley's goodwill. On 10 July 1571 through a letter from Lee, he asked Burghley for permission to write to him directly.¹¹¹

Prestall made it clear to Lee he wanted to leave the Netherlands. To emphasise his newfound loyalty to Elizabeth he revealed an alleged threat to the Queen's person, warning 'she should be careful of her meats and drinks, for some say she shall not reign long'.¹¹² This declaration was probably a dangerous counter to claims made in the Story trial propaganda that Prestall could use magic to poison. In exile Prestall had attempted

¹⁰⁸ TNA SP 15/20 f.155v, John Lee to Lord Burghley, 13 July 1571.

¹⁰⁹ TNA SP 15/20 f.140v, John Lee to Lord Burghley, 5 July 1571.

¹¹⁰ TNA SP 15/20 f.142v, John Lee to Lord Burghley, 10 July 1571.

¹¹¹ TNA SP 15/20 f.142v, Lee to Burghley, 10 July 1571.

¹¹² TNA SP 15/20 f.155v, Lee to Burghley, 13 July 1571.

to extricate himself from his previous involvement with seditious magic while playing both the informant and conspirator with supernatural powers. Indeed in the Netherlands Prestall had claimed he was able to perform magic, while also claiming that it was others who had practiced magic in the conspiracies in which he was involved.

In 1558 and 1562 Prestall's fellow conspirators had stated it was Prestall who had conjured to reveal Elizabeth's life expectancy. But in exile he distanced himself from these acts of magic against Elizabeth, telling Story and others that he knew an 'englyshe man nowe in Irelande who had tolde the Pooles, and hym, the very month, the daye, and houre, that the Queene of Englande shoulde be in hazarde of her lyfe, and that the same Englishe man could dispatch the King of Scottes for money'.¹¹³ This could have also been one Dr Edward Phaer, a mysterious character who would cross Prestall's path again in 1577 and is described, in John Norden's, anti-Catholic, *A Pensive Soules Delight* (1603), as performing 'Nigromanticall practises' with Prestall under Story's command.¹¹⁴

Prestall's correspondents believed that he would soon return to England. Thomas Pullford wrote to Prestall from Dover in November 1571, asking when he arrived at Dover to pay the Master Controller the money he had not paid Mr Clitherow at Calais. This letter was intercepted by Burghley's men as part of his wider observing of Prestall, so when John Lee told Burghley that he 'suspected for Prastauls comynge yn to enyglande', Burghley already knew. Lee's warning also seems premature because Prestall was still in Antwerp in January 1572.¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Anon, *A Copie of A Letter*, sig, B2v.

¹¹⁴ John Norden, *A Pensive Soules Delight*, sigs. D4r-v.

¹¹⁵ TNA SP 15/20 f.220v, John Lee to Burghley, 9 November 1571. Pollitt suggests Prestall did return to England for a secret visit. This is probably not correct. If he had gone to England and then returned to the Netherlands on a secret mission for the Elizabethan state, why would he have supported a planned invasion of England through Scotland.

While observers thought Prestall would return to England, Burghley played his trump card from the Ridolfi Plot. He revealed the intercepted letters between Norfolk and Mary, which he used to press the Queen for Norfolk's execution. Burghley persuaded the Privy Council to declare the Spanish ambassador, De Spes, *persona non grata* and ordered him out of England for his role in co-ordinating the plot, and encouraging individuals to murder Secretary Edmund Mather.¹¹⁶ When this news reached Alva's Court, Prestall, now back in favour, used it to cement his position. Telling everyone who would listen that he 'lykes yt well that the ymbassydor ys comanded away, affyrmyng playnely the gretter the ynjures bee that are offered to *the king of Spain* yt wyll sterre hym to seayke the gretter revenge, wych they trust shortely to see attested as well yn yerlande as yn Scotland besydes the home enemyes'.¹¹⁷

In January 1572, members of the Catholic exile community began turning one of their schemes into planning for the invasion of England via Scotland, hoping for Philip's support.¹¹⁸ Leonard Dacre led the planning with help from Lord Seton. Alva said he would grant them 3,000 men, several pieces of artillery, and some transport to Scotland.¹¹⁹ Seeing the opportunity the invasion plans presented, Prestall encapsulated his ambivalent position when he told Lee that 'I muste seayke my praferment [preferment] by what menes I beste maye'.¹²⁰

As the invasion approached Prestall readied himself for his part. On 22 March he went to Holland 'beynge veary well apoynted boythe of armour and of mony' having

¹¹⁶ MacCaffrey, *The Shaping of the Elizabethan Regime*, pp.423-424.

¹¹⁷ TNA SP 15/21 f.5v, John Lee to Lord Burghley, 15 January 1572. The words in italics are deciphered. Lee repeated Prestall's same sentiment again in a letter to Burghley on 4 February 1572, see TNA SP 15/21 f.33v-34v.

¹¹⁸ TNA SP 15/20 ff.5v-5r, Lee to Burghley, 15 January 1572 and TNA SP 15/21 ff.33r-33v, Lee to Burghley, 4 February 1572.

¹¹⁹ TNA SP 15/21 f.33v, Lee to Burghley, 4 February 1572.

¹²⁰ TNA SP 70/125 f.170r, John Lee to Lord Burghley, 23 March 1572.

spent the previous months using his alchemical skill to produce wildfire.¹²¹ Prestall's role involved him leading 500 men up the mouth of the Thames to destroy the English navy's fleet with his wildfire. Prestall would, according to Lee, be assisted by several of his former servants, probably Roger Horton, his servant before the Dudley Conspiracy in 1556, who already resided in England.¹²² During the planning Prestall bragged of his occult skills and what his wildfire would achieve, for 'he wyll doo more wythe fyve hundered men yn the temes mouthe than the duke shayll doo wythe xl thousande yn ane other place'.¹²³ Prestall's wildfire attack was to precede the exile's army invading England from Scotland.

The plan collapsed when Dutch resistance against Spain stiffened turning the Spanish response into a military campaign leading Alva to ran short of money. Given Prestall's opportunism we should not be surprised that in late 1572, for reasons unknown, he returned to England. Prestall had been in secret correspondence with Lee since late 1571 signing his name as 'Cooke'. In a letter from early 1572 Prestall, hedging his bets, informed Lee about the exiles' plans and the shortage of funds for the expedition, because Alva would have to fund it.¹²⁴ Prestall also claimed he continued secret correspondence with Burghley during this period and late stated that in this correspondence Burghley had invited him home. He stated, later in 1591, Elizabeth 'sent him let[te]r segnend by her own hand, written by the L[ord] Treasurer that being Secretary to her h[onour] therby pleading him to return into England' promising immunity for his past if he returned.¹²⁵ It remains unclear why Burghley would convince Elizabeth to put her signature to a letter offering Prestall a safe return. He may have

¹²¹ TNA SP 70/125 f.170r, Lee to Burghley, 23 March 1572.

¹²² TNA SP 70/125 f.170r, Lee to Burghley, 23 March 1572.

¹²³ TNA SP 70/125 f.170r, Lee to Burghley, 23 March 1572.

¹²⁴ TNA SP 70/125 f.171r, Lee to Burghley, 23 March 1572.

¹²⁵ TNA SP 12/238 ff.104v-105v, Examination of William Kynnersley, 8 March 1591; TNA SP 12/238 ff.109v-110v, Deposition of Margrey Kynnersley, 16 March 1591.

feared the inspiring role of Prestall's magic in the exiles' plots, and did not want to risk another abduction operation, similar to Story's, when Prestall could be enticed back with a simple letter.

If Burghley had, as Prestall said, asked him to return, it may be possible he claimed England needed Prestall's ability to transmute base metals into gold, as this is the talent Prestall offered to extract himself from unfavourable situations. One can only speculate that Prestall may have offered his alchemical services to Elizabeth or Burghley, who then used that offer to reply and lure him back to England. This could explain why he was not suspicious at being invited back to England, if indeed he was invited back, and did not just return of his own accord, as he felt he had overstayed his welcome in Holland.

Whatever the reason for Prestall's return, as soon as he set foot in England in late 1572, the 1571 indictment against him facilitated his arrest and imprisonment without trial in the King's Bench.¹²⁶ Prestall's immediate imprisonment strongly suggests Burghley knew he was returning, either because he lured him back, or his network of informants had warned him of Prestall's movements. Prestall's time in exile playing both sides to pursue the best option, left him trusted by no one. Because he did not stand trial it is difficult to know if he was imprisoned as a conspirator, or because Burghley deemed prison the most appropriate place for a self appointed double agent that no one could or would trust.

Here an interesting comparison can be made between Prestall and William Parker. Both were named in the May 1571 indictment and both men had conspired and collaborated while in exile.¹²⁷ Parker had been in exile since mid 1560, but his

¹²⁶ TNA SP 12/77 ff.155r-164v, Indictment of Richard Norton, May 1571.

¹²⁷ TNA SP 12/77 ff.155r-164v, Indictment of Richard Norton, May 1571.

involvement in the abduction of John Story meant he was in England when the indictment was drawn. Tower records show he had been in prison since December 1570, where he impersonated Story as part of Burghley's actions to uncover the Ridolfi plot. However Parker suffered no consequences from the indictment. When the indictment was created in May 1571, he was released from the Tower. Then in December 1572 as Prestall grew accustomed to his new residence at the King's Bench prison, Parker was granted a licence to trade between England and the Netherlands.¹²⁸

Prestall remained confined in the King's Bench until 5 July 1574 when suddenly one John Rooper, esquire, from Lingsted in Kent, and one Edward Best, a London mercer, paid £200 each towards Prestall's bail bond releasing him on the proviso he 'shalbe of good behaviou^r and not departe out of the realme untill he shall have licence of the Quenes Ma^{ties} or ther LL[ordships] for that purpose'.¹²⁹ Rooper and Best paid only part of the massive £900 bond, Prestall paid the remaining £500. Rooper paid his share of Prestall's bond at the request of Richard Verney, a Warwickshire Gentleman Pensioner and relative of the diplomat Henry Cobham. Verney learnt of Prestall's plight in his role as Marshal of the King's Bench. Prestall must have made weighty promises to convince Verney to support him, and for Verney to persuade Rooper and Best to pay over a substantial sum of money, each, to bail Prestall. Best only paid his portion of Prestall's bail because the other two agreed to make Prestall a 'close prisoner' in Best's custody as a guarantee he would not break the bond they had put up for him.¹³⁰

¹²⁸ BL Cotton MS Galba C IV, f. 285r, Licence for William Parker to Trade with the Netherlands, December 1572. Parker will have been importing only into England because of Alva's trade embargo on English exports to the Netherlands.

¹²⁹ TNA PC 2/10 fo.244-247, Meeting of the Privy Council at Richmond 5 July 1574.

¹³⁰ BL Lansdowne MS 46 f.45r, Prestall to Burghley, October 1585.

Prestall may well have gained Verney, Rooper and Best's support with promises of alchemy. The aging Verney, a client of Leicester, would probably have known of Prestall's work for Leicester's court associate Pembroke, in 1567. Alternatively Prestall may have convinced Verney to find the sureties for his release with promises of alchemical coining. The cash strapped Verney keen to take up the offer, reached out to wealthy friends who could support the bond.

Prestall paying part of his own bond is most unusual. He did so when arrested for conjuring in 1558, but to pay the bail on an indictment of treason is very rare. He must have had something material as collateral, as the Privy Council would not have accepted a promise of payment and would have investigated the substance of his ability to pay the bond to ensure he did not flee, once released. It is possible he may have used the last remnants of Henry Owen's estate. If so, what Prestall had left of Owen's property must have been concealed and not under Prestall's name because any money would have been confiscated by the Exchequer when he fled abroad.¹³¹

After his release Prestall possibly started coining in Essex. In December 1577, his associate Dr Edward Phaer, an Essex alchemist, condemned in the Tower for counterfeiting wrote to Cecil desperately pleading for mercy and offering to inform on his friends because

ffor Magik I can find out as many that waye, and yf I might speak wth my olde companyons (and many of them ar in this towne) I wold hunt out a marvelous packe of them with their bokes and relliques / yea and wth that art goeth many a fylthy cerymony, as masse, sacrafyce, and other service of the devill. Also ^my^ acquaytance supposing me to be the same ma[n] I was before, wold disclose their myndes unto me wherby I shold understand that w^{ch} my consyence, and bounden duyty wold not permit me to conceal.¹³²

¹³¹ TNA SP 12/110 ff.15r-16r, Names of Such Englishmen as are Certified into the Exchequer to be Fugitives Over Sea, 26 December 1576.

¹³² BL Lansdowne MS 25 f.146v, Edward Phaer to the Lord Treasurer, December 1577.

Phaer's offer included a list of numerous alchemists operating in England including 'a confederat John Prestal and an alkymist', coining in Essex.¹³³ Burghley never followed up on Phaer's list and he remained in the Tower until February 1578, when he was probably executed, but his accusations suggest good reasons why Prestall could find sureties for his massive bond in 1574.¹³⁴ The size of the bond reflects the fact that Prestall had been imprisoned for treason. The facts of Prestall's release suggests that Leicester may have used his authority to obtain it, though no evidence connects him to any coining.

In October 1575 Richard Verney accompanied his cousin Lord Cobham to Spain when he died of fever *en route* through France.¹³⁵ Cobham wrote to Burghley asking for the now vacant post of Marshal of the King's Bench, because 'the queene's majestie shoulde thearby give me a stocke to stand by in her sarvice, and with that staffe dryve from her a begger'.¹³⁶ However Verney's death did not free Prestall from his bonds as Verney had not paid for his release. Best and Rooper were now solely responsible for Prestall's bond and apparently saw no sign of the promised gold.

In March 1576 Rooper petitioned the Council asking to be discharged from Prestall's bond now that Verney had died, obviously not wanting to bear the risk of Prestall misbehaving.¹³⁷ Rooper again petitioned the Council on 11 June. The Council records show 'he desyreth to be released of his bands, his sute was thought rasonable, and he required that it shold be cancelled, seeing the two other bandes stode in their

¹³³ BL Lansdowne MS 25 f.146v, Phaer to the Lord Treasurer, December 1577.

¹³⁴ CRS, *Miscellanea* III, pp.7-8. 'The Tower Bills' 9 November 1577 to 15 February 1578.

¹³⁵ TNA SP 70/135 ff. 248r-248v, Lord Cobham to Lord Burghley, 15 October 1575.

¹³⁶ TNA SP 70/135 f. 248r, Cobham to Burghley, 15 October 1575.

¹³⁷ TNA SP 12/107 f. 216r, Petition of John Rooper to the Council, 30 March 1576.

force' suggesting that they grant Rooper's request leaving Prestall bonded to himself and Edward Best.¹³⁸

While Rooper sought a release from liability for Prestall's behaviour, Prestall was slandering the credibility of another alchemist, William Medley who had obtained a royal patent giving him a monopoly over the transmutation of iron into copper, which had dimmed Prestall's prestige in the alchemical patronage market. Elizabeth's patent had not only made illegal alchemical production by anyone other than Medley, but his process eventually absorbed much of the funds and interest of potential patrons as they invested in Medley's scheme through the 'Society of the New Art'.

This project had started in 1571 while Prestall plotted in the Netherlands. Elizabeth had granted letters patent to a group of courtiers and councillors calling themselves the 'Society of the New Art' after Medley had shown that he could transmute iron into copper, potentially making England self-sufficient in industrially and militarily vital copper production, removing the need to import it from Catholic Europe.¹³⁹ Medley a servant and was a distant kinsman of Burghley, half brother to Sir Henry Grey, and had studied at the Middle Temple in the 1560s.¹⁴⁰ However unlike Prestall, he made no great claims about his alchemical abilities, relying on his practical observations to attract support.

Medley's process relied on using boiling sulphuric acid (vitriol) to dissolve copper ore. When iron was cast into the mixture, the dissolved copper sulphate cemented itself onto the iron. This real physical industrial process appeared to the sixteenth-

¹³⁸ TNA PC 2/11 f.28, Meeting of the Privy Council at Greenwich, 11 June 1576.

¹³⁹ BL Lansdowne MSS 14 ff.40r-41v, A Brief for the Patent Issued to the Society.

¹⁴⁰ Charles Henry Hopwood and Charles Trace Martin (eds.), *Minutes of Parliament of the Middle Temple*, Vol. I, London, 2008, p.144.

century observers to constitute transmutation. Medley was installed at Poole in Dorset to turn iron into copper through ‘alchemy’ using vitriol, having given a successful practical demonstration to Sir Thomas Smith and Humphrey Gilbert, Walter Raleigh’s half brother, in early 1571.¹⁴¹ However the work ground to a halt, because the cost of importing the requisite vitriol from Europe became prohibitive.¹⁴² Medley’s claims to be able to create vitriol boiled away into nothing, leaving him blaming the location as unsuitable for production.¹⁴³ Smith could not supervise Medley’s work at Poole because Elizabeth made him her ambassador to Paris. He relied on Gilbert to manage the operation but Gilbert and Medley fell out over Medley’s slowness of production.¹⁴⁴ The enterprise at Poole soon collapsed however Medley had more success in 1574 at Parys Mountain, on Anglesey. Medley struggled for the next few years to make his industrial alchemical process economically viable.

The process could only be conducted without vitriol at Parys Mountain, essentially a gigantic copper deposit, which in the late eighteenth century became the world’s largest copper mine. The mineral waters in the area were so saturated with dissolved copper that the process worked easily. However, production costs proved too high, so that in Smith’s opinion, the investor’s ‘proportion of charge’ always exceeded their ‘proportion of gain’.¹⁴⁵ Furthermore about this time the Company of Mines Royal in Cumbria began to use the same process more efficiently, and we hear no more about Medley until his arrest on 1 September 1576.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴¹ Deborah Harkness, *The Jewel House: Elizabethan London and the Scientific Revolution*, New Haven, 2007, p.174.

¹⁴² BL Lansdowne MS, 19, f.45r, Thomas Smith to Cecil and Leicester, 15 December 1571.

¹⁴³ BL Lansdowne MS, 19, f.45r, Smith to Cecil and Leicester, 15 December 1571.

¹⁴⁴ Mary Dewar, *Sir Thomas Smith: A Tudor Intellectual in Office*, London, 1964, p.153.

¹⁴⁵ Dewar, *Sir Thomas Smith*, pp.150-151.

¹⁴⁶ James Campbell, ‘The Alchemical Patronage of Sir William Cecil’, Master of Arts Thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, Forthcoming, 2009.

Historians since John Strype in the eighteenth century have assumed that Medley's arrest was the end of the 'Society', and represented the inevitable fate of an occult conman.¹⁴⁷ However, the arrest seems to have been engineered by Prestall to reopen the market for alchemical patronage. At the time Prestall was allied with one Thomas Curtess, a servant to the Earl of Warwick. Curtess was allegedly a friend of Medley's. Curtess had lent Medley £60 to repay a debt he had with several investors in the Society.¹⁴⁸ Prestall and Curtess also engaged the services of Prestall's brother-in-law, Murphyn, the skilled forger of letters, who forged a letter to Leicester from a relative of Medley's, Thomas Wotton, a gentleman from Devon. Choosing Wotton as the author of the letter proved a masterstroke because Wotton, a county gentleman, had no court connections, and thus seemed more believable as a concerned client, humbly offering information to Leicester, than the politically tainted Prestall. The forged letter informed Leicester that Medley's delays and setbacks in producing a return to the investors came not from technical difficulties but malicious intent.¹⁴⁹ Leicester had suggested that many of his clients invest with him in Medley's work. He therefore risked losing not only his investment, but more importantly his honour and reputation amongst his followers.

The Mayor and Sheriff of London arrested Medley at Leicester's command and locked him away in the Counter prison. Burghley requested Medley's release to continue his alchemical work. But the Sheriff declined, because Medley had been detained by 'special warrant under the hands of the Earls of Warwick and Leicester, and is more closely detained by force of another special warrant from their lordships to that effect'.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁷ John Strype, *The Life of the Learned Sir Thomas Smith, Kt.D.C.L., Principal Secretary of State to King Edward the Sixth, and Queen Elizabeth: Wherein are Discovered many Singular Matters Relating to the State of Learning, the Reformation of Religion, and the Transactions of the Kingdom, During His Time*, New Edition, London, 1820, p.105.

¹⁴⁸ TNA SP 12/86/14, William Medley to Cecil 19 April 1572; Strype, *Sir Thomas Smith*, p.105.

¹⁴⁹ 'Thomas Wotton to Leicester, 2 October 1576', in quoted G. Eland (ed.), in *Thomas Wotton's Letter-Book 1574-1586*, London, 1960, pp.11-12.

¹⁵⁰ HMC *Salisbury*, II, p.141, n.413, Edward Osborne and Wolstan Dixie, Sheriff of London, to Lord Burghley, 12 September 1576.

Leicester wrote to Wotton thanking him for the information concerning Medley's 'woordes and deedes spoken' that had enabled him to rescue his money and reputation before it was too late.¹⁵¹ A confused Wotton replied on 2 October 1576, telling Leicester that

the cause of his commyttinge, and therupon the commyttinge and brutes or reaportes after the commyttinge I am also altogether ignoraunt yn, and so I neither knowe the man nor the matter; neyther was I (nor this that I have said standinge trewe, coulde I be), the authoure of the letter that yowe wryt of. Yf under my name any one have unto your good Lordeshippe sennt suche a thinge as yowe receyve in good parte, in that yowe like it, I am (oneli yn respecte of that likinge), right gladde of it.¹⁵²

Wotton continued that he 'wished the partie him selfe under his owne name to have taken the praise and thancks of his owne doynge' not knowing that Prestall and Curtess had concocted the 'brutes as tende to the infamie and suche accusations as tende to the perill of anye personne' in the letter.¹⁵³ We only know the letter originated from Prestall and Curtess because Medley's lone supporter, Lady Mary Dudley Sidney, sister to Leicester and Warwick, sprung to his defence. Like her brothers, she and her husband Sir Henry Sidney had patronised Medley. Since Medley was their social equal, she had developed a friendship with him that allowed her to see through Prestall's slanders. She wrote to Burghley on 29 September 1576 telling him that Medley had been imprisoned in the Counter through 'the complaint, and continewlle mallisius presecutinge the same, ~~mp~~ by Prestall, Courtis, [Curtess] and souche other, who yf the[y] wer but envyuys only to med[ley] upon some old grudge a mongst them, yea tho the[y] used the matter never so exstreamly, and lyke to thear condision, in all thear dowings, most faulsly against him'.¹⁵⁴ Although Lady Sidney's letter identified Prestall and Curtess as the culprits, there is no evidence Burghley acted on her tip-off, just as he did nothing about Phaers'

¹⁵¹ 'Thomas Wotton to Leicester, 2 October 1576', p.12.

¹⁵² 'Thomas Wotton to Leicester, 2 October 1576', p.11.

¹⁵³ 'Thomas Wotton to Leicester, 2 October 1576', p.11.

¹⁵⁴ BL Lansdowne MS, 23 ff. 184r-185r, Lady Mary Sidney to Burghley, 29 September 1576.

allegations of Prestall's Essex coining operation. In fact Burghley warned Lady Sidney against supporting Medley against her brother. Thus Medley remained imprisoned in the Counter until 1578, when his accuser Prestall was arrested.

Prestall's name appears in the official records concerning the English exiles around this time, probably erroneously. In December 1576, John Prestall, Gentleman of Surrey, appears on an Exchequer list for 'The names of all suche as to be certified into thescheque^f to be fugitives over sea contrary to the statute of anno xiiij [Eliz]'.¹⁵⁵ Everyone on this list forfeited their lands and property for leaving the realm without licence, under the statute of An Act Against Fugitives over the Sea, which responded to the flight of Catholics into exile after the Northern Rising.¹⁵⁶ This entry seems to have been a mistake. It is unlikely Prestall was abroad in 1576, otherwise Rooper could not have successfully petitioned for a release from his bond and there is no record of Edward Best securing a similar reference. Under these bonds Prestall could not leave England without licence. Phaer's later accusation also suggests that Prestall remained in England. Rather his inclusion on the list probably dates back to his time in the Netherlands. Whereas the regime could unilaterally add a name when a recusant went abroad, individuals had to apply to have their name removed from the list. Prestall had been imprisoned as soon as he entered England in 1572 and then after his release in 1574 he would not have wanted to attract attention while illegally coining. He probably also initially lacked the money to pay the necessary fee to have his name removed from the list.

Prestall's downfall in late 1578 enabled Medley to secure his release. In early August 1578, while Elizabeth and her Court were on Progress in East Anglia, the

¹⁵⁵ TNA SP 12/110 ff.15r-16r, Names of Such Englishmen as are Certified into the Exchequer to be Fugitives Over Sea, 26 December 1576.

¹⁵⁶ SR, 1547-1585, pp.531-534, 13 Eliz, c3: 'An Acte Agaynst Fugytyves over the Sea'.

Committee charged with ensuring security in London made a frightening discovery in Islington. Under a dunghill they discovered three wax images; two males and a female image, with Elizabeth etched onto the forehead.¹⁵⁷ The Committee assumed that the images had been placed under the dunghill so that the heat of the decomposing dung would melt the wax and slowly kill the Queen. On 15 August the Commissioners sent the three wax images with a letter to the Privy Council.

On receiving the wax images at Norwich the Council agreed with the London Committee that they represented a Catholic assassination plot against Elizabeth. Their fears about the images were heightened because King Charles IX of France was widely believed to have been killed in 1574 by the same type of magical device.¹⁵⁸ Elizabeth, approaching her forty-fifth birthday, had suffered poor health that summer and by mid September felt distinctly unwell. Her teeth were rotting, she may have had infected gums and by October was suffering excruciating pain, which physicians could not explain. To her Protestant councillors this proved that the wax images were Catholic magic.

The Polymattic occult philosopher Dr John Dee arrived in Norwich shortly after the images. With references of him as a conjurer edited from the 1576 edition of Foxe's *Act and Monuments* (1576), Leicester had ordered him to Norwich to inform the Queen about his new book, *Brytanici Imperii Limites* [*The Limits of the British Empire*] (1578), which suggested reviving an English Empire in Europe based on Arthurian claims.¹⁵⁹ These arguments supported Leicester's desire to intervene in the Netherlands in support of the Protestant Dutch, despite the resistance of Catholic courtiers in Elizabeth's Court. Dee's timely arrival saw him ordered by the Privy councillors to determine who made the

¹⁵⁷ *CSP Spanish*, 1568-1579, p.611, n.524, Bernardino de Mendoza to Zayas, 8 September 1578.

¹⁵⁸ *CSP Venetian*, 1558-1580, pp.509-510, n.585, Sigismondo di Cavalli, Venetian Ambassador in France to the Signory, 27 April 1574.

¹⁵⁹ For details of Dee's *On the Limits of the British Empire* and his views of the British Empire in Europe see: Glyn Parry, 'John Dee and the Elizabethan British Empire in its European Context', *The Historical Journal*, Vol 49, no 3, 2006, pp.643-675.

wax images against Elizabeth. Within hours of his arrival Dee had performed some type of counter-magic to nullify the enchantment of the images.¹⁶⁰ He most probably cast a questionnaire horoscope to determine the culprits. Dee requested the presence of the Council members to reassure them that the curse had been broken and to demonstrate his magic was greater than the magic that had been used against Elizabeth. However only Secretary of State, Thomas Wilson, felt brave enough to observe Dee's performance and report to Elizabeth.¹⁶¹

On 20 August 1578 after Dee's counter-magic, the Council ordered the London Committee to 'lerne by some secrett meanes where any persons are to be found that delighted are thought to be favourers of suche magicall devices'.¹⁶² The Commissioners eventually arrested one Henry Blower, a Catholic, on 30 August 1578 committing him to the Poultry Compter, followed by his father, Henry Blower the elder, on 7 October.¹⁶³ These two arrests did not satisfy the Council, still on progress, who demanded they find those who had attempted to kill Elizabeth. The Council authorised the use of torture against the Blowers and anyone else arrested.¹⁶⁴ Blower the younger was transferred to the Tower, where on the rack he accused Thomas Harding, a Protestant vicar and known conjurer in Islington.¹⁶⁵ The authorities knew of Harding, having the previous April followed up an accusation of petty conjuring against him, laid by a condemned thief, desperately blurting out his name in the hope of securing a pardon.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁰ Parry, 'John Dee and the Elizabethan British Empire', p.668.

¹⁶¹ Parry, 'John Dee and the Elizabethan British Empire', p.668.

¹⁶² APC 1577-1578 pp.308-309, The xxth of August [1578], at Norwich.

¹⁶³ TNA SP 12/140 f.78v, Certificate of Prisoners Committed to the Poultry Compter, 31 July 1580.

¹⁶⁴ HMC *Salisbury* XIII and Addenda, pp.160-161, Sir William Cordell to the Same [Lord Burghley], 25 September 1578.

¹⁶⁵ TNA SP 12/131 f.144, Henry Blower, Prisoner in the Marshalsea, July 1579; Richard Verstegan, *The Copy of a Letter Lately Written by a Spanishe Gentleman, to His Freind in England: In Resutation of Sundry Calumnies, There Falsly Bruited, and Spred Emonge the People*, London, p.7.

¹⁶⁶ Parry, *The Arch-Conjuror of England*.

Harding was arrested in mid September.¹⁶⁷ After relentless interrogation by Sir William Cordell, the Master of the Rolls, and Sir Owen Hopton, Lord Lieutenant of the Tower, they ‘could not bring him to confess any matter of weight that he was charged with’.¹⁶⁸ The exasperated interrogators brought Blower face to face with Harding, where Blower again accused Harding of having made the wax images, and of being a papist.

In early October, while interrogations of Harding were making little progress and his gaolers were resorting to torture to extract his confession, the Privy Council arrested Prestall. This could have been part of a round-up of all the ‘usual suspects’, but it could also have been part of a wider contest between Prestall and Dee dating back to 1567, when Dee was passed over by his patron Pembroke in favour of Prestall’s alchemical skill to cure his ailments and produce gold. Dee’s questionnaire horoscope may have been the means to settle the old score against Prestall.¹⁶⁹ Whatever its origin, the Council certainly believed in Prestall’s involvement in the wax images.

Phaer’s accusation of Prestall’s coining in January 1578 had not been investigated, perhaps written-off as the exaggerations of a condemned man. Now though, Prestall and his history of using subversive magic against Elizabeth dominated the Council’s thinking. On 12 October 1578 the Council wrote to Burghley asking him to recover everything he had on Prestall from his papers, and particularly requested the indictment from April 1571 ‘drawn againste John Prestall nowe prisoner in the Tower, w^{ch} indictment at this p[rese]nte Is for diui[r]se consideracons to be p[er]used’.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁷ *APC 1577-1578*, p.328, At Mr. Stoner’s house, 21 September 1578.

¹⁶⁸ *HMC Salisbury*, XIII and Addenda, p.161, Sir William Cordell to the Same [Lord Burghley], 25 September 1578.

¹⁶⁹ Parry, *The Arch-Conjuror of England*.

¹⁷⁰ TNA SP 12/126 f.17r, The Privy Council to Lord Burghley, 12 October 1578; PC 2/12 f.269, Meeting of the Privy Council at Richmond, 12 October 1578.

Leicester involved himself in the witch-hunt to root out the Catholic assassins. He devoted himself to the task to demonstrate his personal loyalty to Elizabeth, especially since he had secretly married the Countess of Essex on 20 September 1578.¹⁷¹ Unravelling a Catholic conspiracy provided some insurance against this being revealed, but it also presented an opportunity to sweep back the advance of Elizabeth's remaining Catholic courtiers, emboldened by their support for the French Catholic Duke of Anjou's marriage negotiations with Elizabeth. With Prestall and Harding in custody, Leicester told Burghley that he had been instructed 'to Axamyn these fellowes at the Tower by her ma^{ties} comandment'.¹⁷² He employed the rack to extract the truth from Prestall and Harding, but neither would give him the confession the Council desired. Prestall did produce the name of a fellow conjurer, a Yorkshire priest called Emerson, not involved with the wax image affair, but who may have been involved in Prestall's coining operation for Verney in 1574.¹⁷³ However, after several weeks, and despite Leicester's vigorous use of the rack, the Council's investigation had stalled. They could not connect the 'plotters' with Catholic courtiers, and had to satisfy themselves with condemning Harding and Prestall to death for treason in early 1579, a trial whose records are now lost.

Word of the wax image sorcery against Elizabeth spread around Europe through Jean Bodin's *De la Demonomanie des Sorciers* (1580) but as it did, the true identity of the images' caster transpired in London.¹⁷⁴ Catholics later gleefully reported that a Protestant called Thomas Elkes 'confessed himself to haue bin the doer there of: yet not to destroy the Queene, but to obtaine the love of some Londoners wyf'.¹⁷⁵ Innocent men had been incarcerated and tortured on suspicion of treason, when in reality it had only

¹⁷¹ Alan Haynes, *The White Bear: the Elizabethan Earl of Leicester*, London, 1987, p.33.

¹⁷² TNA SP 12/126 f.20r, Leicester to Burghley 17 October 1578.

¹⁷³ *APC*, 1577-1578, p.382, The xth of November, at Richemond.

¹⁷⁴ Jean Bodin, *De la Demonomanie des Sorciers*, Anvers, 1580, sigs. E4v, Gg1r.

¹⁷⁵ Verstegan, *The Copy of a Letter Lately Written*, p.7.

been love magic. Elkes had been in an Essex gaol for the previous few months, arrested for conjuring while Leicester and the Council investigated the image affair.¹⁷⁶ The councillors now desperate to save face and give the impression they had not over reacted, determined to leave Elkes where he was and commuted Prestall and Harding's sentences to indefinite detention in the Tower. Blower the younger had been moved to the Marshalsea in April 1579 and when his petition for release was received the Council quietly granted it.¹⁷⁷ Harding remained in the Tower until 1582 when he disappeared from the records and may have died.¹⁷⁸

Leicester's action had been high risk. If the wax images had been cast by a Catholic sorcerer, Leicester could have used that fact to point out the subversive nature of Catholicism, facing down Catholic courtiers and questioning the Anjou match, a potential marriage between Elizabeth and the French Duke of Anjou which was central in foreign policy considerations of the 1570s. But the revelation that the images were innocuous love magic exposed the hollowness of Leicester's claims and helped to precipitate his fall from grace and favour of Elizabeth's Court. Michel de Castelnau, Seigneur de Mauvissière, the French ambassador exploited Leicester's weakened position and countered Leicester's opposition to the Anjou marriage negotiations by disclosing that Leicester had secretly married the Countess of Essex, without Elizabeth's permission.¹⁷⁹ Leicester, Hatton and Walsingham, all implicit in the marriage and in concocting the conspiracy around the images' discovery, were excluded from Court until early in 1580. This time Leicester was not saved by his position as Elizabeth's favourite, as he had been when exposed by Burghley in 1561.

¹⁷⁶ Parry, 'John Dee and the Elizabethan British Empire', p.668.

¹⁷⁷ TNA SP 12/131 f.144r, Henry Blower, Prisoner in the Marshalsea (who accused Harding), to Mr. Secretary Wilson, 25 July 1579.

¹⁷⁸ CRS, *Miscellanea III*, pp.6-9.

¹⁷⁹ Haynes, *The White Bear*, p.135.

There is irony in the fact Prestall spent the next decade in the Tower. This was the longest period Prestall spent in prison, but rather than punishment for an act caught red handed, it was because the Privy Council wrongly identified him as involved in a conspiracy that did not really exist. Not wanting to lose face the Privy Council then held him in the Tower on the ground of his back catalogue of deeds in the 1560s and 1570s. Prestall's accuser, John Dee, lost his access to the Queen with Leicester's exclusion from the Court until late 1580. Prestall would not be released until 1588 when Leicester sought his alchemical knowledge while Dee was in Prague at the Court of the Habsburg Emperor Rudolph II.

CHAPTER FOUR

1580s-1590s: An Ambiguous End

The sixteenth century's two final decades were also John Prestall's last and mark a step change down in Prestall's conspiring but not conniving. Prestall spent the decade 1578 to 1588 in the Tower and when released showed signs of being greatly affected by his time in detention.¹ During his time in prison he petitioned for release and as we shall see was released to alchemically cure the unlikely group of Leicester, Warwick and Ormond. He also created an unusual precedent in English law by arguing he was not a full person, and then suffering from his decade in prison disappeared into history leaving those he damaged behind and an ambiguous set of circumstances that give no real closure to anyone.

Prestall's incarceration allowed those to whom he owed money or had cheated to pursue him, knowing he could no longer evade them while in the Tower. An excellent example is the case of Jane Hales. While Prestall coined alchemical gold in Kent in the mid-1570s he duped William Hales, Jane Hales' husband.² He either convinced Hales to invest in his alchemical coining or to lend Prestall money with the promise of repaying it with alchemical gold, the same manoeuvre Prestall had used on Henry Owen in the early 1560s. Shortly after Prestall's capture William Hales died leaving Jane Hales with his debts to others and desperate to retrieve their money from Prestall. In 1580 Jane petitioned the Privy Council because she 'remaineth in dainger to be caste out of all that

¹ TNA SP 12/178 ff.173r-173v, The names of the Prisoners in the Tower, and statement of the several causes for which they have been committed, 27 May 1585; TNA SP 12/215 ff.42v-43r, Certificate by the Lieutenant of the Tower of the names of the prisoners in his custody, with the duration of their imprisonment, 14 August 1588.

² TNA PC 2/13 f.239, Meeting of the Privy Council at Richmond, 6 November 1580.

she hath unless order be taken by Prestall for the satisfieng of the said debte'.³ The Privy Council on 6 November 1580 wrote to the Lieutenant of the Tower euphemistically telling him they had decided to allow Prestall to 'suffer some one or two of the frinds of the saide Prestall to have accesse unto him to deale wth him for some order to be taken for the answering of the debt, and discharg of the poour widow'.⁴ The Privy Council allowed several such visits to Prestall and we can only assume that under this pressure he settled the debt with Jane Hales because the matter was not addressed again.⁵

Prestall's release from the Tower came as the result of cooperation from an unusual grouping of Lords. In January 1581 Thomas Butler, tenth Earl of Ormond and Lord-General of Elizabeth's army in Munster, jotted at the end of a letter to Thomas Wilson, Secretary of State, 'do a charitable dead to move The q[ueen's] maiesty to extend Her marcye to poer prestall who I wished now of late sins my cominge hether to haue ben with me beinge extremly handled with the strangorye'.⁶ Clearly Ormond had heard of Prestall's talent as an alchemist and his reputation as an alchemical doctor. 'Strangury' was the contemporary name for the symptom of painful and frequent urination and wrenching spasms sometimes be associated with kidney stones or bladder cancer, and certainly would have hampered Ormond's Irish campaign. It remains unknown how exactly Ormond learnt of Prestall's alchemical skills. The most likely explanation is that he had heard of Prestall's release from the Tower in 1566 to cure the Earl of Pembroke's ailments. Ormond was in England in September 1566 to receive his Oxford MA and then entered Gray's Inn in March 1567, so he moved in the Court and London circles where Prestall was well known.⁷

³ TNA PC 2/13 f.239, Meeting at Richmond, 6 November 1580.

⁴ TNA PC 2/13 f.239, Meeting at Richmond, 6 November 1580.

⁵ TNA PC 2/13 f.239, Meeting at Richmond, 6 November 1580.

⁶ TNA SP 63/80 f.33, Earl of Ormond to Secretary Wilson, 15 January 1581.

⁷ David Edwards, 'Butler, Thomas, tenth earl of Ormond and third earl of Ossory (1531–1614)', *ODNB*, 2008, [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/4209>].

Elizabeth appointed Ormond Lord-General partly because he was her cousin. Once again we see that Prestall's Court connections reached to the levels of the nobility. However nothing came of Ormond's letter to Wilson. Interestingly Wilson himself could have done with some of Prestall's alchemical medicine, because he died at St Katherine's Hospital near the Tower on 20 May 1581. While Ormond was bogged down fighting the second Desmond rebellion in Ireland, and defending his actions from his detractors on the Privy Council, he did not actively pursue Prestall's release again until 1588. Prestall knew of Ormond's attempts to obtain his release, and was furious that Ormond did not pursue it during this period. Later Prestall was recorded as saying, after the two were reconciled, that during this period 'yf he had ben at libertie he had thought to have killed the Erle of Ormonde'.⁸ Prestall, always putting himself first, accused Ormond of ignoring him and instead concentrating on the death of his wife in September 1582, his second marriage that November, and the birth of his two children: a son in 1583 and a daughter in 1585.⁹ With continued unrest in Ireland, clearly Ormond had a lot on his plate, though the state of his strangury during this time is unclear.

When it became apparent that Ormond had lost interest in his cause, Prestall turned to petitioning Burghley to solicit his release. In October 1585 he wrote to the Lord treasurer, pleading for him

favourably to remember my obedience in coming: and in yo^f pitie to consider the tymes pasted: and for that it pleased yo^f honor to say to my dafter that I had received .12. yeares imprisonment: the truths, I was betwene .6. and .9. monthes, close prisonar, in beastes [Edward Best] house: and then a smale tyme in her ma^{tie}['s] porters Lodge: one year and more, in the marscalseas [Marshalsea]: in her ma^{ties} benche, a bowt .2. yeares, and as I remember .7. yeares vpon bandes and in this howse now [the Tower] .8.yeares and more: most humbly desiring yo^f honor for gods ^cawse^ not to take thes writings nor any other, to have in them any thoughte of contempt: but of my lamentable intersession, wth humblenes to

⁸ TNA SP 12/238 f.104v, Examination of William Kinnevsley, 8 March 1591.

⁹ TNA SP 12/238 f.104v, Examination of William Kinnevsley, 8 March 1591.

move yo^r pitie towards mee: and yf I may wth gods assistance receiue yo^r honors fauoure, and my libertie.¹⁰

Burghley, preoccupied with the Netherlands campaign and growing threat of Spanish invasion, showed no interest in Prestall's petition despite his accompanying alchemical offer to make gold. Prestall failed this time to secure release with a familiar ploy of promising alchemical advancement, and Burghley prudently left him locked away in the Tower.

The Netherlands particularly occupied Burghley's attention. Prestall's letter coincided with Burghley's search for money to pay for Elizabeth's promised expeditionary force under Leicester. Turning down Prestall's alchemical offer to serve 'wth any benefit that god hath bestowed vpon mee' indicates how far he had alienated the Lord Treasurer.¹¹ Burghley had been reluctant to assist the Dutch militarily despite Leicester's constant pressure. But since the assassination of William of Orange, the Dutch leader in July 1584, Burghley saw no alternative but to send Leicester's expedition to support the Dutch Protestants. In August 1585 Elizabeth signed the Treaty of Nonsuch with the Dutch, eventually declaring war on Spain, by default. The treaty required Elizabeth to pay £126,000 a year to maintain 6,400 English foot soldiers and 1,000 English cavalry in the Netherlands until the war against Spain ended.¹² A sum Burghley, as Lord Treasurer, struggled to find and which no doubt prompted Prestall's offer to create gold.

Burghley ignored Prestall's offer, because William of Orange's assassination had raised security anxieties in England. Access to the Court was tightened as the Privy Council became even more concerned than it had been when the wax images were discovered in 1578. In response to the assassination, Burghley and Walsingham had co-

¹⁰ BL Lansdowne MS 46 f.45r, Prestall to Burghley, October 1585.

¹¹ BL Lansdowne MS 46 f.45r, Prestall to Burghley, October 1585.

¹² Williams, *The Later Tudors*, p.306.

authored the Bond of Association in October 1584, pledging all signatories to pursue until death anyone who threatened Elizabeth's life or would profit by her death.¹³ This was followed by Elizabeth's fifth Parliament from November 1584 to September 1585 where the 'Act for Provision to be Made for the Suretie of the Queeness Majesties most Royal Person and the Continuance of the Realme in Peace', debarring Mary, Queen of Scots from the English throne without mentioning her by name, was enacted.¹⁴ In the light of these actions to prevent Elizabeth's murder and prepare for a Protestant state that could continue without her, it is not surprising Burghley did not agree to Prestall's release. Every time he had been released and pardoned in the past he had returned to conspiring Elizabeth's death.

Ormond's strangury flared up again in 1588 and he turned to Leicester to secure Prestall's alchemical services. The fact that Ormond approached Leicester to use his influence on Prestall's behalf demonstrates the extent to which belief in magic could influence political alliances, just as Prestall's coining had had influenced Scottish factional politics in 1569. Ormond had fallen out with Leicester over Ormond's dispute with Leicester's brother-in-law, Sir Henry Sidney, Deputy Lord-Lieutenant of Ireland.¹⁵ Both Sidney and Ormond tussled over the conduct of Irish policies in the 1570s, before and after the two Desmond Rebellions. Sidney joined those who publicly criticised Ormond's tactics in suppressing the second Desmond rebellion, but now Leicester was Ormond's only avenue to obtain Prestall's release. With a Spanish attack imminent, Burghley would not release Prestall, the condemned traitor. Leicester, however,

¹³ Read, *Lord Burghley*, p.293.

¹⁴ SR, 1547-1585, pp.704-705. 27 Eliz, c.1: 'Act for Provision to be Made for the Suretie of the Queeness Majesties most Royal Person and the Continuance of the Realme in Peace'.

¹⁵ 'Butler, Thomas, tenth earl of Ormond', *ODNB*; also: Steven G. Ellis, *Ireland in the Age of the Tudors, 1447-1603: English Expansion and the End of Gaelic Rule*, London, 1998, pp.265-310. For a good summary of Ormond and Sidney's dispute.

suffering from what historians now think was a malarial infection contracted in the Netherlands, desperately needed Prestall's medical alchemical abilities to improve his deteriorating health.¹⁶

Prestall also claimed that Elizabeth's Secretary of State, William Davison, had been instrumental in petitioning Leicester on his behalf, following his incarceration in the Tower in February 1587.¹⁷ Secretary Davison had, with Burghley, colluded to force Elizabeth into signing Mary, Queen of Scots' death warrant, by lying to her saying that she needed to urgently sign the warrant as the Spanish Armada had landed in Wales.¹⁸ They then implemented the warrant without telling Elizabeth of the execution, as they knew Elizabeth would change her mind at the last moment. For this deceit and to ease Elizabeth's guilt at killing her cousin, Davison was made a scapegoat, tried in the Star Chamber and sent to the Tower, while Burghley escaped with sequestration from court for six months.¹⁹

In the Tower Davison kept up an extensive correspondence with members of the Privy Council and other influential courtiers, trying to secure his release. His correspondence may have mentioned Prestall, who in 1587 turned sixty.²⁰ On 13 July Philip Howard, the thirteenth Earl of Arundel, and a Tower prisoner for his adherence to Catholicism, petitioned Burghley for his own release. Howard snivelled 'that amongst all y^e prisoners here at this instant w^{ch} (as I think) are xxljth at y^e least I am the eldest, excepting Prestall and M^r Shelley, both of them being committed and condemned

¹⁶ Simon Adams, 'Dudley, Robert, earl of Leicester (1532/3–1588)', *ODNB*, 2008, [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/8160>].

¹⁷ TNA SP 12/238 f.104r, Examination of William Kynnersley, 8 March 1591.

¹⁸ John Guy, 'Imagining and Detecting Conspiracy, 1571-1605', 2007, [<http://www.tudors.org/public-lectures/77-imagining-and-detecting-conspiracy>].

¹⁹ Simon Adams, 'Davison, William (d. 1608)', *ODNB*, 2008, [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/7306>]. He was never formally dismissed as Secretary of State and continued to hold the title Mr Secretary, resuming in the role when released eighteen months after he was sent to prison.

²⁰ 'Davison, William', *ODNB*.

persons'.²¹ Davison's letters and Ormond's apparent prodding of Leicester with claims of Prestall's ability to cure them both, along with Leicester's brother, the Earl of Warwick, who had suffered a wound during the Newhaven expedition at the start of Elizabeth's reign that never fully healed, finally forced Leicester's hand.²² A decade after he had tortured Prestall and incarcerated him in the Tower over the wax images, Leicester started the process to have Prestall released.

Leicester released Prestall into Warwick and Ormond's custody on 22 July 1588, the eve of the Armada.²³ Possibly Leicester also bailed Prestall because of his alchemical abilities to make wildfire, as he had done in the Netherlands in early 1572. Leicester oversaw England's military preparations for the Armada, including constructing a defensive boom across the mouth of the Thames between Tilbury and Gravesend to stop Spanish vessels attacking London. The English did have a small quantity of wildfire in fire pots that acted as incendiary devices to throw onto Spanish ships to start unstoppable fires.²⁴ If Prestall did make wildfire for Leicester it would be an ironically useful contribution to the defence of Protestant England and would demonstrate just how mercenary he was, putting himself before any allegiance to one side or the other.

Prestall's primary purpose once out of the Tower was to improve Leicester, Ormond and Warwick's health. However, once released, Prestall disappeared from the historical record until late 1589. He probably went to ground because his alchemy failed to improve the health of the Dudleys. Shortly after the defeat of the Spanish Armada on 4 September 1588 Leicester died from malarial fever, accentuated by exhaustion.

²¹ TNA SP 12/202 f. 74r, Earl of Arundel to Lord Burghley 13 July 1587.

²² Simon Adams, 'Dudley, Ambrose, earl of Warwick (c.1530–1590)', *ODNB*, 2008, [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/8143>].

²³ CRS, *Miscellanea*, III, p.27.

²⁴ Neil Hanson, *The Confident Hope of a Miracle: The True Story of the Spanish Armada*, London, 2003, p. 328.

Warwick's leg eventually turned gangrenous and after having it amputated in January 1590, he died from blood poisoning.²⁵ Prestall's alchemy might have been successful for Ormond, as he lived until 1614, with no more recorded complaints about his strangury.

When Leicester took Prestall from the Tower he did not seek a pardon for his treasons, as Burghley had done in 1566. When questioned about it later, Prestall said he had rejected Leicester's offer of a pardon because he could clear his own name once at liberty.²⁶ It is more likely Prestall received no pardon because he could have been sent back to prison if necessary. This omission of a pardon would have implications for the last recorded episode of Prestall's life.²⁷

In Michaelmas 1589, William Waad, Armgill Waad's son and a clerk of the Privy Council sued Prestall in the King's Bench for debts. The nature of the debts is unknown, but Prestall could have accrued them from making alchemical promises, as this was the origin of many of his debts. During the case Prestall, with typical ingenuity, argued that he could not be called to answer Waad's accusations in court because despite being released from the Tower his attainder for treason still stood and thus he was not a 'full man' in the legal sense, like a person declared insane, or a monk or other such religious person who owned no property. Many details of the case and its outcome have not survived, but the ruling that dashed Prestall's defence to dodge Waad's accusation has endured in the legal precedent it set by stating:

in the action of debt or other action brought against a person attainted, he cannot plead the attainder, and demand judgement, if during the attainder he shall be put

²⁵ 'Dudley, Robert, earl of Leicester', *ODNB*; 'Dudley, Ambrose, earl of Warwick', *ODNB*.

²⁶ TNA SP 12/238 f109r, Deposition of Margrey Kynnersley.

²⁷ 'Butler, Thomas, tenth earl of Ormond', *ODNB*.

to answer ... it was adjudged that the person attainted should not plead the said plea, but should be put to answer. And there is a great diversity between an attainder of treason or felony, and an entry into religion; for he that is attainted of treason or felony hath capacity, and may purchase lands to him and his heirs.²⁸

This ruling caught Edward Coke's eye when he sought precedent setting cases and rulings to write his *Institutes of the Laws of England* (between 1628-1644) because it did cemented the legal precedent that for any person 'notwithstanding the Attainder, his body remains subject to arrests and execution for debts'.²⁹ Prestall did not return to the Tower as a result of the case, but Waad would continue to pursue him through his powers as a Justice of the Peace for Middlesex and Clerk of the Privy Council.

As Clerk to the Privy Council, by the early 1590s Waad had been tasked by the Council with pursuing Catholic dissidents. Gary M. Bell described Waad as having the 'task of ferreting out and then examining, often under torture, men suspected of treasonous intent', a task at which he excelled and made him the terror of Jesuits and English recusants.³⁰ It would have been easy to monitor Prestall's activities through his work without raising suspicions. With Prestall's reputation for subversive behaviour, Waad's attention would have been seen as diligence.

In March 1591 Waad used his position to take the voluntary depositions of William and Margrey Kynnersley, after Prestall visited them at their Aldersgate Street house in London. Waad recorded the couple's recollections of Prestall's peculiar conversations, as he tried to uncover Prestall's activities in the early months of 1590, just after their court case. The Kynnersleys could provide no details about Prestall's recent

²⁸ Edward Coke, *The Third Part of the Institutes of the Laws of England: Concerning High Treason, and Other Pleas of the Crown and Criminal Causes*, London, 1628, reprinted 1809, p.215.

²⁹ Coke, *The Third Part of the Institutes of the Laws of England*, p.213.

³⁰ Gary M. Bell, 'Waad, Sir William (1546–1623)', *ODNB*, 2008, [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/28364>].

activities but offered to surreptitiously enquire on Waad's behalf, and provided the names of several men they said were Prestall's 'servants'.³¹

The two depositions, William Kynnersley's taken on 8 March and Margaret's on 16 March 1591, clearly show Prestall had been mentally traumatised by his decade in the Tower. He was convinced that the government were conspiring to ruin his life, and trying to systematically undermine his attempts to obtain what he thought was his entitlement. Prestall had some grounds for this view. In 1578 the Elizabethan regime had been paranoid about him undermining Protestant England.

Prestall told the Kynnersleys how Burghley and Elizabeth had wronged him. He bitterly recalled the two promises of immunity for his plotting that he believed Burghley had promised him. They had persuaded him to return from exile in 1563 and 1572, only for Burghley to imprison him once he landed in England. In Prestall's eyes the fact that he had been 'a Spie for England' while in the Netherlands only made this betrayal worse.³² Prestall raved on that Burghley was 'the greatest Enemy he had in England', calling him 'the wyzarde of England' and a 'worldlinge' out only 'to fill his owne purse and good for no bodie and the realme was rather the worse then the better for him'.³³

On the other hand Prestall had nothing but praise for Leicester, and saw their shared past through rose-tinted spectacles because Leicester had bailed him from the Tower. He acknowledged Leicester had 'wronged him' but recalled their final reconciliation.³⁴ Prestall downplayed the fact that Leicester had tortured him in 1578 and then left him in the Tower. Instead he accused Burghley and Elizabeth of collaborating

³¹ TNA SP 12/238 ff.105v-105r, Examination of William Kynnersley, 8 March 1591.

³² TNA SP 12/238 f.104r, Examination of William Kynnersley, 8 March 1591.

³³ TNA SP 12/238 f.104v, Examination of William Kynnersley, 8 March 1591.

³⁴ TNA SP 12/238 f.104v, Examination of William Kynnersley, 8 March 1591.

against him and complained that he had been prepared for execution three times, before the executions were commuted.

Prestall lamented Leicester's death telling William Kynnersley, 'howe weake[ned] yt [the state] was by the death of the Erle of Leicesters, whoe after the[ir] reconsiliacion becam his good friend and sent him word he would make his credyt as greate as ever yt was wth her ma^{tie}'.³⁵ He told Margrey Kynnersley that with Leicester's passing Burghley, who cared 'more to enriche him self than for the welfare of the country w^{ch} was the worsse by him' would have unchecked influence over Elizabeth's policies.³⁶ This prospect no doubt worried Prestall, as it fed his conspiratorial theory that Burghley was out to get him, now that his only 'defender' at court, Leicester, had died.

Prestall also had a warped sense of his own popularity. He mentioned to Margrey Kynnersley that he had declined Leicester's offer to seek a pardon for his treasons because despite being prepared for execution three times, he would not have been killed. Prestall believed that at his execution 'sundry gentilmen of accounte' would have stood in the way of the executioner.³⁷ He then told William Kynnersley that five hundred gentlemen would have 'laine in the waie and some of them shuld have put a Sword in^{to} his hand'.³⁸

Prestall's rose tinted glasses also coloured his recollection of his time in the Netherlands. Rather than oscillating between popularity and the complete isolation he actually experienced in the exile community Prestall remembered the high esteem in which he had been held while at the 'K[ing] of Spaynes Councill'.³⁹ Here he probably referred to Alva's court in the Netherlands, because there is no evidence he was ever

³⁵ TNA SP 12/238 f.104v, Examination of William Kynnersley, 8 March 1591.

³⁶ TNA SP 12/238 f.109v, Deposition of Margrey Kynnersley, 16 March 1591.

³⁷ TNA SP 12/238 f.109r, Deposition of Margrey Kynnersley, 16 March 1591.

³⁸ TNA SP 12/238 f.104r, Examination of William Kynnersley, 8 March 1591.

³⁹ TNA SP 12/238 f.104r, Examination of William Kynnersley, 8 March 1591.

received at Philip's court in Spain. Prestall's recollections do not match to the reality of the months he spent away from Alva's court in apparent disrepute after Dr John Story's abduction to England in 1571. He believed Burghley and Elizabeth had deliberately enticed him home to England because of his popularity at Alva's court.⁴⁰

The old man's ramblings eventually led him into dangerous political fantasies. Prestall was convinced that he had noble ancestry and it was this reason that Burghley and Elizabeth conspired against him. They wanted to deny him the wealth and power he deserved because, he told the Kynnersleys, he was 'born of very high bloode, and was the nexte hier to y^e Pooles' who had claims to the throne. He even claimed that Elizabeth 'had once granted that he [Arthur Pole] sholde have ben made known the heyre apparent of this kingdome'.⁴¹ As we saw in Chapter One Prestall derived from a family of comfortable gentry, with no links to the Pole Family. Elizabeth also never acknowledged a successor, that was one of the central concerns of Elizabethan policy makers, and why they worried so much about the threat implied by Prestall's conjuring and conspiring against Elizabeth's life. As we saw in Chapter Two, the Pole's conspiracies against Elizabeth in 1558 and 1562 ruled them out of the succession.

Prestall recognised this, and contradicted himself by claiming that Arthur and Edmund Pole's brother, Geoffrey, then in a Spanish exile, was the 'nexte in bloode and heyre ^apparrant^ to her ma^{ty}, and so had ben confirmed and [e]stablished under the grate seale of this Realme ~~by her honor~~ as her ma^{ty} promised him; if he had not foretold her and gave oute that he wold alter y^e state of y^e religion'.⁴²

Prestall decried Elizabeth's knights while she ignored his 'high blood'. He singled out the travesty of Elizabeth knighting Sir Francis Drake and Sir Walter Raleigh,

⁴⁰ TNA SP 12/238 f.109r, Deposition of Margrey Kynnersley, 16 March 1591.

⁴¹ TNA SP 12/238 f.109r, Deposition of Margrey Kynnersley, 16 March 1591.

⁴² TNA SP 12/238 f.110r, Deposition of Margrey Kynnersley, 16 March 1591.

men that ‘others spoke much shame of’ and considered criminal rogues.⁴³ Prestall also rambled to Margrey Kynnersley, that ‘he hoped shortly ‘to be one of the [Privy] Council as well worthy, ~~and kery~~ for his knowledge of the state of this kingdom as the best of them all’.⁴⁴ However, as part of the wider conspiracy he thought existed against him, he said Burghley had prevented his appointment to the Privy Council, and even more surprisingly that Burghley had prevented Elizabeth from appointing him Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster.⁴⁵

The Kynnersleys’ depositions in 1591 are the last substantive record of John Prestall. One might have expected that his slanderous accusations against Elizabeth could have consequences once documented by Waad as Privy Council clerk. But interestingly there is no evidence of any consequences and no further record of Prestall until Burghley mysteriously returned to Henry Owen’s Chancery case in 1598.

In 1598, in the months before Burghley died, one of his secretaries copied Henry Owen’s Chancery deposition against Prestall from the 1560s with no accompanying explanation.⁴⁶ It is possible that Owen approached Burghley because Prestall was dying or had died. Owen would have sought Burghley’s acknowledgment of how Prestall had ruined him, and his family, so that he could reclaim the lands and chattels Prestall had taken. If Prestall died without Owen receiving some formal acknowledgment of his case he would have had no legal grounds on which to sue those who now possessed the lands Prestall had sold and goods he had embezzled. However this manuscript did not start a paper trial. Owen may have spent years trying to work out what happened to all his property, so when Owen petitioned Burghley in 1598 it was too late. Burghley died on 4

⁴³ TNA SP 12/238 f.109v, Deposition of Margrey Kynnersley, 16 March 1591.

⁴⁴ TNA SP 12/238 f.109r, Deposition of Margrey Kynnersley, 16 March 1591.

⁴⁵ TNA SP 12/238 f.109r, Deposition of Margrey Kynnersley, 16 March 1591.

⁴⁶ BL Lansdowne MS 87 ff.99r-101r, John Prestall's Entrapping Henry Owen in certain bonds, 1598.

August 1598 at his Westminster House, and there is no evidence of Owen petitioning Burghley's son, Robert Cecil.

John Prestall's disappearance at the end of his life is disappointingly mundane, though aptly fitting for the way historians have treated him. In 1603, the year Elizabeth I died, John Norden published his anti-Catholic *A Pensive Soules Delight* (1603) listing Elizabethan England's internal Catholic enemies and their conspiring against Elizabeth.⁴⁷ In Norden's trite verse he simplistically referred to Prestall, as one of the Antichrist's 'locust Catholickes' conjurers, by last name only, suggesting it held resonance amongst Norden's intended audience.⁴⁸ However Prestall's identification with the threats to Protestant England did not endure. His name faded amongst the noise from the chorus of other dangerous men and threats to national security in England's history. John Prestall ended his life a gentleman, but in name only. With his treason, betrayals and debt accruing lifestyle, Prestall destroyed and squandered everything his grandfather, Elias, and father, Thomas, had worked so hard to provide for the family. At the close of his life, with no date or cause of death, John Prestall had just drifted into history leaving behind the ruined life of his stepson Henry Owen, no doubt still seeking justice.

⁴⁷ Alfred W. Pollard, 'The Unity of John Norden: Surveyor and Religious Writer', *The Library*, New Series, Vol. VII, no.3, December 1926, p.242. Pollard argues it could have been written anytime between 1587 and its publication date in 1603. But incorrectly states it does not mention the Spanish Armada.

⁴⁸ Norden, *A Pensive Soules Delight*, sigs. Title Page, D4r-D4v.

CONCLUSION

Norden's cursory treatment of John Prestall in 1603 was unwittingly prescient for how later historians would discuss him. As this thesis has shown Prestall was a particularly complicated figure motivated by an unscrupulous attitude towards his own self-interest and self-preservation rather than his faith as Norden suggests. Prestall's spendthrift behaviour drove him to play both sides against the middle in wild political schemes and conspiracies always seeking to remedy his impecunious situation with the best deal for himself.

Prestall could have been a member of the county gentry. His grandfather, Elias Prestall, cut the family a comfortable niche amongst the Sussex gentry which Prestall's father, Thomas Prestall, extended and defended, achieving the social rank of esquire before handing it all on to John. However, Thomas' death was the highwater mark of the Prestall family's upward social mobility. The family's wealth took two generations to acquire and John Prestall less than a decade to squander leaving only his social rank and a constant need for more money. Thus, Prestall descended into the political underworld to peddle his magical talents. As we have seen, Prestall's life could not have been more divergent from that of his father Thomas Prestall. Thomas' later life was beset by legal challenges, some of which may have been of his own making, but John Prestall's life was a litany of conspiracies, cons, prison stints, flights to exile, betrayals and petitions for patronage. The two veins that pump through Prestall's story are his perennial deluge of debts and his use of occult powers.

Prestall's biography shows magic held influence in Elizabethan politics. Prestall's use of occult philosophy at different times and in different situations, both for

and against members of the Elizabethan Court has shown that politics and magic are not distinct entities to be studied in isolation, but rather the two are interrelated. The upper echelons of Elizabethan Society believed that divination and alchemy were genuine talents possessed by men such as Prestall, because their world-view reasoned that occult forces existed in the cosmos around them and could be harnessed by those with the specific knowledge. As we have seen, whether out of fear, greed or desperation people were convinced by Prestall's self-promoting claims to possess magic abilities, despite these claims originating from such a nefarious character. Prestall's alchemy appeared to cure Pembroke of his illness in 1566 which convinced Ormond, Warwick and Leicester to have him released from the Tower of London to cure them fully knowing his past behaviour. Lord Maxwell in Scotland was convinced Prestall could coin alchemical gold in 1569, as were Verney, Rooper and Best in 1574. Burghley even considered Prestall's conspiratorial sorcery enough of a real and present danger to contemplate snatching him from Scotland in a cross border raid.

Prestall's experience shows magic was a powerful political tool in the politico-religious environment of Elizabethan England. The Privy Council's world-view perceived Catholic threats to Elizabethan England everywhere. In a world that did not fully appreciate the concept of coincidence, magic was a solid explanation for unexplainable events. Thus, filtered through the Privy Council's Protestantism, councillors saw magic as a weapon used by Catholics who wanted to settle the royal succession in favour of the Catholic Mary, Queen of Scots. The Privy Council assembled otherwise discrete events and incidents of conjuring, to present them as part of a larger Catholic conspiracy, utilising magic as a weapon, and threatening England. This manipulation of events was not purely the concoction of events to increase Privy councillors' authority, but rather it was the result of viewing events in terms of the ideological struggle to protect Protestant England from a Catholic Europe. A threat that

in their eyes required them, as Privy councillors, to do whatever was necessary to defend England's Protestant faith and Queen. No point demonstrates this more accurately than how the Protestant ideology of the Privy Council jaded the councillors' prejudice when they were presented with three wax images in 1577 and were convinced they were Catholic sorcery, conjured to kill Elizabeth. Their overarching ideology blinded them to other possibilities; the images were nothing more than innocuous love tokens.

John Prestall's approach to his Catholic faith does not sit comfortably in the current English Catholic historiography. Rather, as we have seen, he conspired in both Catholic and Protestant plots, with his Catholicism taking second place to his ruthless opportunism. He was willing to take any offer that would satisfy his self-interest and present the opportunity to wipe the debts that weighed him down throughout his life. This meant conspiring against both Mary I and Elizabeth I, and while conspiring against Elizabeth also informing on the activities of his fellow Catholic conspirators when the opportunity arose during his 1570s Dutch exile.

John Prestall is certainly not an isolated case and indeed may be representative of many who inhabited the Elizabethan Court's murky fringe. However currently further research is needed into those figures who slunk around in the penumbra of Elizabethan politics. Prestall's personal experience on the Court's fringe shows a complicated web of patronage and betrayal. A world of contradictions and inconsistencies that are exacerbated by the dearth of straightforward evidence. However as Prestall's biography has shown his experience of Elizabethan England stands in stark contrast to the Victorian's 'Golden Age' perception of the period. Further investigation into other figures of Prestall's ilk would allow a greater comparison of John Prestall to his contemporaries, and further examination of events from the perspective of fringe figures, rather than just the political elites, would provide a broader understanding of Elizabethan

history. Tudor and Elizabethan history is written as a history of personalities and this history is not complete if historians only shine their light on the figures that sparkled at Court. For a full understanding of Elizabethan politics, religion and society a light must also be cast over the Prestallian figures of the age; even if these personalities reflect a particularly unpleasant picture back at us.

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