

WASC 1949

Article

'The Ninth Earl
and the Gunpowder Plot'
and the Howland
Gunpowder Hills*

3 (h) - The Ninth Earl and the Gunpowder Plot

To say that the Hounslow Mills were in any way connected with the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 would be a matter of extreme conjecture, but the peripheral involvement of Henry Percy, the Ninth Earl of Northumberland (1564-1632) with this act of treason, provides a link which cannot be ignored.

Syon House has been the residence of the Northumberland family since Elizabethan times when the Queen first granted the lease of the estate to the Ninth Earl, and appointed him steward of her manor in Islaworth. The Earl was a close friend of James I and when the King made his entry into London, he was at his right hand. James appointed him a Privy Counsellor, and gave him under letters patent ' the Manor of Isleworth Syon, and Syon House and the demesne lands and Appurtanances'. The lands included large areas of Hounslow Heath.

The Earl was a staunch Catholic, at a time when the religion was not tolerated. James I was a Protestant King, but promised the Earl that he was enthroned he would relax some of the penal laws against Catholicism, a promise that he later denied. Sir Robert Cecil, Earl of Salisbury, regarded the Ninth Earl as a dangerous man, and told James through Lord Henry Howard that the Earl was " beloved of none, followed by none, trusted by no one nobleman or gentleman of quality within the land beside his faction".

The lack of toleration shown by the King for the Catholics, eventually led to the plan known as the Gunpowder Plot, whereby an attempt was made to blow up the House of Lords on the 5th November, 1605. The details of the plot need not concern us, and it is sufficient to say that there were five main conspirators, the most well known, although not the most important, being Guy Fawkes. One of the other four, however, was Thomas Percy, cousin and employee of Henry Percy, the Ninth Earl of Northumberland.

Thomas Percy was an agent for the Earl's northern estates, and the Earl had appointed him Gentleman Pensioner, despite complaints from the tenants that he was swindling them. Percy was heavily involved in the Plot and attended all the meetings. One of his main duties as a conspirator was to use his position to secure a tenancy on a building close by the Houses of Parliament. On 4th November, the eve of the discovery of the Plot, Percy was dining with the Earl at Syon House and was called into the courtyard to speak to a messenger who had ridden from London to see him - the messenger turned out to be Guy Fawkes. After the discovery, Percy was pursued and eventually killed by a musket ball, and so eluded a trial. He was found to be in possession of nearly £4,000 of the Earl's rent money, with which he had originally hoped to help finance the Plot, but latterly had put the money aside to use for his escape.

On 6th November rumours began to circulate about the Earl and his involvement in the Plot. The Earl of Salisbury seized the opportunity to suggest that the Earl of Northumberland probably knew and approved of the conspiracy, even though he had not taken an active part. The evidence against him, although circumstantial, was very convincing. In the first place, he was the leader of the Catholic cause in Britain, and actually gave advice to Pope Pius V. Secondly, Thomas Percy, an unscrupulous crook, was his cousin and his employee, working under the Earl's jurisdiction. Thirdly, Thomas

Percy had £4,000 of the Earl's money in his possession, which the Earl insisted had been stolen from him, and finally, Percy had dined with the Earl at Syon House on the 4th of November and had met Guy Fawkes on the premises.

By 11th November the Earl was under open arrest and a contemporary report states that: "The Earl of Northumberland, who is now under restraint at the house of the Archbishop in Croydon, being in question for some matter concerning Thomas Percy, his steward, protesteth that though Percy saw him at Sion House upon the Monday before the Plot yet it was but by chance, and that Percy had cheated him of his Northern rents by some lying tale, five horse-loads of money, £3,000 and more".

Although there was difficulty in framing an indictment against the Earl, the Attorney General finally listed six charges, whilst being unable to openly accuse him of being implicated in the Plot. In summarising the case against Northumberland, Sir Edward Coke argued that :-

"In the beginning to the King's reign and at the end of the Queen's, the Earl of Northumberland became the head of the Catholic cause, and he desired Catholics might depend on him. After the Pope had set forth two damnable bulls against the King, the Earl knowing of them, sent this Percy to Scotland to ask for a toleration of the Catholics, with two letters and a message pretending the more easy entrance if he would give hopes of toleration, which were intolerable and not to be endured, for that an Englishman's heart grieves to see another kind of worship. Upon Percy's return out of Scotland the Earl of Northumberland told the Catholics that the King's commandment was that they should be eased of their persecution, which the King himself in verbo regis says he never did promise or command. After this Percy and Catesby plotted their treason and yet soon after Percy was made a Pensioner ; a fit man to put an axe into his hands to carry it over the King's head ! And not only was he made a pensioner, he never took any oath!"

The Earl was ordered to pay a fine of £30,000, to forfeit all offices under the Crown, and to be imprisoned in the Tower of London for life. He remained there until 1621, when he was released. During his time in prison he devoted himself to astrology and scientific pursuits, and earned himself the title of the 'Wizard Earl'. He died in 1632 - ironically on the 5th November !

Reports suggest that the Earl was innocent and had no knowledge of the Gunpowder Plot although an element of doubt must exist. Some historians feel that Thomas Percy, as a fellow Catholic and an employee of the Earl, would have informed his master if only to save him from being blown up with the other peers in the House of Lords. And what had they talked about at Syon House on the 4th November ?

It has been suggested in section 3(b) that powder mills existed on Hounslow Heath during Elizabethan times, and we have evidence that James I granted a charter to the industry. If this is true then the mills would have been situated on land belonging to Syon House, and the Ninth Earl, who succeeded to the title in 1585, would have issued the leases to the owners of the mills. By this token, the Earl, and perhaps even Thomas Percy, would have had access to supplies of gunpowder.

It is not known for certain where the conspirators obtained the supplies of gunpowder used in the Plot, and apparantly they were not questioned about their source of supply at the trial. There were several places where they could have purchased it. By 1555 there were powder mills near Rotherhithe and by 1561 at Waltham Abbey. Elizabeth granted a monopoly to Richard Hills and George and John Evelyn in 1558 for manufacture outside London. From 1590 George Evelyn had also set up works at Long Ditton and Leigh Place in Surrey. There were also mills at Faversham by this time.

When the Plot was discovered, it was found that the conspirators had used 36 barrels of gunpowder which was valued at £200. This was a considerable amount of money, especially when compared with the fact that Guy Fawkes had recently sold his mother's house and received £29 in payment. The question arises as to where the conspirators obtained such a large sum of money, and why the purchase of such a qauntity of powder by civilians was not questioned by the manufacturers.

The powder was obviously obtained from one of the factories in the London area with no questions asked. Could it be that supplies came from the Hounslow Mills at the request of someone who was known to them ? This implies that Henry Percy, the Nineth Earl of Northumberland had knowledge of the Plot, but can never be proved one way or the other.