

SUMMARY: The document below is an undated letter written by Sir Robert Cecil to Michael Hicke after the death of Lord Burghley expressing his determination that Oxford should not be given custody of his daughters, Bridget Vere (1584-1631) and Susan Vere (1587-1629). Lord Burghley died 4 August 1598. For his will, see TNA PROB 11/92/316.

Sir Robert Cecil's animus towards Oxford is very evident. It appears Oxford had sent word to Thomas Bellot, the executor of Lord Burghley's will, who was at Theobalds, that he wanted to see his daughters. Cecil suggests that if this has put Bellot in a difficult position, he should let Cecil deal with Oxford personally ('turn him to us'), and he will put an end to the matter ('we shall do well enough').

Cecil's next words are obscure. He may be saying that Bellot should tell Oxford that before his death Lord Burghley had put Bellot in charge of Oxford's daughters, with the implication that Bellot was to deny any request by Oxford to see them. Cecil says Lord Burghley's servant, Henry Maynard, will support what Bellot says. However Cecil says that Bellot is not to swear to the statement, since it is not true.

Alternatively, it may be that Cecil is saying that Bellot should tell Oxford he has been placed in charge of Oxford's daughters by Cecil, and has been told to deny Oxford access to them, and that Lord Burghley's servant, Henry Maynard, will support what Bellot says. At the same time, Bellot is not to swear that it was Cecil who gave the order, thus giving Cecil deniability if necessary.

Cecil then turns his attention to another matter. Dr Gabriel Goodman, Dean of Westminster, co-executor of Lord Burghley's will with Thomas Bellot, has raised a specious legal argument which would defeat Oxford's two daughters of the marriage portions left to them by Lord Burghley. Cecil implies that Goodman has raised this legal 'cavil' at the behest of his elder brother, Thomas Cecil, 1st Earl of Exeter, who is infuriated that Lord Burghley has bequeathed all his jewels to Oxford's daughters. Cecil emphatically declares he will have no part of his brother's scheme to break their father's will; however since it appears the legal argument being raised by Goodman was a tenuous one, and unlikely to succeed, this pious sentiment probably cost Cecil nothing.

Cecil then turns to Oxford's desire to have custody of his daughters, telling Michael Hicke to advise Thomas Bellot that Oxford cannot have custody under any circumstances, hinting darkly that if Oxford's daughters were to die without issue, Oxford's heirs would inherit the lands Lord Burghley had left them. In fact, such an outcome was precisely what Oxford and Lord Burghley had intended when Oxford parted with Castle Hedingham. It was left to Lord Burghley for life, then to Oxford's three daughters and their issue, and if all three daughters were to die without issue, then to the heirs of the 16th Earl, that is, Castle Hedingham would revert back to the de Vere family which had owned it for centuries. The agreement Oxford and Lord Burghley had made with regard to the descent of Castle Hedingham seems eminently fair, and it is difficult to attribute Cecil's objection to anything other than animosity towards Oxford.

Cecil's next objection is equally specious. As an argument that Oxford should not have custody of his daughters, Cecil rails that he 'never gave them groat, hath a second wife and another child'. In fact, Oxford had given his three daughters much more than a groat; he had given them Castle Hedingham. Moreover his second wife had been in attendance on Queen Elizabeth for many years, and was exactly the sort of person who could be trusted to raise Oxford's daughters appropriately. In addition, Oxford had a commodious home at Hackney which would offer them suitable accommodation.

Cecil ends his letter by implying that Oxford might steal his daughters away before Cecil can place them in the custody of the Dowager Countess of Bedford.

For Bridget (nee Hussey) Morison Manners Russell (d. 12 January 1601), Dowager Countess of Bedford, who after Lord Burghley's death had custody of Oxford daughters, Bridget Vere and Susan Vere, and whose grandson married Bridget Vere, see her will, TNA PROB 11/97/10.

For Michael Hickes (1543-1612), one of Lord Burghley's two principal secretaries, see the *ODNB* entry, and Barnett, Richard C., *Place, Profit, and Power: A Study of the Servants of William Cecil, Elizabethan Statesman*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969), pp. 80-87.

For Henry Maynard (b. after 1547, d. 11 May 1610), Lord Burghley's other principal secretary, see the *ODNB* entry; Barnett, *supra*, pp. 94-103; his will, TNA PROB 11/118/123; and the will of his father, John Maynard, TNA PROB 11/39/39. See also TNA SP 14/45/146, f. 205 concerning Maynard's proposed purchase of Castle Hedingham.

For Thomas Bellot, Lord Burghley's steward, see Barnett, *supra*, pp. 32-40.

Mr Hickes, I thank you for your letter and for your care. As for my Lord of Oxford's claim, if Mr Bellot do but turn him to us, we shall do well enough, and above all things we desire that he do say, though not swear, that such charge was given him by parol, which Mr Maynard shall witness.

For the Doctor's cavil to defeat them of their portion, God knows I never intend it, but be you sure my brother thinks so hardly to have none of the jewels as I fear me he will stand now upon all advantages, but I will never consent in such a kind to break my father's testament.

For any private things at Theobalds, good Mr Hickes, end them, for I am weary of the noise of such beggarly things as they are and will be when they are at best. I commit all to you.

Tell Mr Bellot if the Earl of Oxford should desire the custody he cannot have them of anybody, for if he look upon the deeds whereby my Lord hath conveyed them their lands, he shall find that for default of issue their land comes to the heirs of his body, nor whether he that never gave them groat, hath a second wife and another child be a fit guardian, consider you. If once my Lady Bedford were come in town we would quickly conclude. I wish Mr Bellot to have good care they be not stolen away by his means. I would they had some honest man there while Mr Bellot's eye is absent from them. When you are there, I pray you, take order with my wardrobe that any stuff they want or anything else may be given them.

On Monday night I shall be at London, but I pray you, do not come from Theobalds without some end. I have written out mine eyes today, and therefore farewell.

Your loving friend,
Robert Cecil

Addressed: To my loving friend, Mr Michael Hicke

Endorsed: Mr Secretary 1598. The Earl of Oxford requiring the custody of his daughters upon the Lord Treasurer's their grandfather's death