



# EDWARD DE VERE NEWSLETTER NO. 30

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## Was the author of the Langham *Letter a Mercer and a Merchant-Adventurer?*

In the final paragraph of the *Letter*, the author indeed makes these claims. He signs himself:

Yoor countreeman, companion, and freend assuredly:  
Mercer, Merchauntaventurer, and Clark of the Councill  
chamber doore, and allso kepar of the same: *El  
prencipe negro. Par me. R.L. Gent. Mercer* (Kuin  
80).

The author thus offers three significant clues to his identity: he claims to be a Mercer, a Merchant-Adventurer, and both Clerk and Keeper of the Council Chamber Door. But can these claims be relied upon? Was there a real-life Robert Langham who was a Mercer, a Merchant-Adventurer, and both Clerk and Keeper of the Council Chamber Door?

The answer seems to be that no person who was all three things ever existed, and that the Keeper of the Council Chamber is one individual named Robert Langham, the Mercer is an entirely different Robert Langham, and the Merchant-Adventurer is the anonymous author himself.

There is no dispute about the fact that there was a real-life Robert Langham who held the position of Keeper of the Council Chamber. Scott has discovered several Privy Council warrants authorizing payment to Robert Langham of an annual stipend of £10 for the years 1573-1578 and 1580 for services as "Keeper of the [Privy] Council Chamber", a position which included such duties as:

provision of bowghes and flowers . . . a fier shovell,  
peyer of tonges, bellowse and forke for that Chamber  
(Scott 299).

These Privy Council warrants clarify two points. Firstly, Robert Langham was not the "Clark of the Councill chamber doore". The title held by the real-life Robert Langham was "Keeper of the Council Chamber". The author's use of the title "Clark", an entirely different position from that of "Keeper", and one requiring a superior education, appears to be both facetious and deliberately misleading. Someone who held the position of a clerk would hardly be found busying himself outside the Council Chamber door, as Langham says he does in the *Letter*:

Noow syr, if the Councill sit, I am at hand, wait at an  
inch I warrant yoo. If any make babling, peas (say I)  
wot ye whear ye ar? If I take a lystenaar, or a priar in at  
the chinks, or at the lokhole, I am by and by in the  
bonez of him: but noow they keep good order, they  
kno me well inough: If a be a freend, or such one az I  
like, I make him sit down by me on a foorm, or a cheast,  
Let the rest walk a Gods name (Kuin 77-8).

These lines cannot be interpreted as a straight-faced description by Robert Langham himself of the bustling and officious manner in which he "guards" the Privy Council Chamber door. They seem rather to be the amused observations of an anonymous author who is enjoying a jest at Robert Langham's expense.

The Privy Council warrants also make clear the menial nature of Langham's duties, and the fact that his salary was a mere £10 per annum. None of this is consonant with claims that the Keeper of the Coun-

cil Chamber was also a Mercer.

During the Elizabethan era, the Mercers were foremost among the twelve great livery companies of London, trading principally in silks and other luxury fabrics (Herbert 237). A member of the Mercers' Company was, almost by definition, a wealthy man.

Is it realistic to suppose that a minor court official, a Keeper of the Council Chamber, was one of the wealthy members of this great livery company?

At the beginning of the *Letter*, the author makes no such claim. He calls himself merely an "officer attendant in Coourt". The title page of the *Letter* reads:

A letter whearin, part of the entertainment untoo the Queenz Maiesty, at Killingwoorth Castle, in warwik Sheer, in this soomerz Progress. 1575, iz signified: from a freend officer attendant in Coourt, untoo hiz freend a Citizen, and Merchaunt of London (Kuin 35).

On the following page, the author identifies the friend who is a "Citizen, and Merchaunt of London". He is "my good freend, Master Humfrey Martin Mercer" (Kuin 36).

There is historical evidence of Humfrey Martyn's membership in the Mercers' Company. He was admitted to the Company by patrimony in 1570 (Kuin 13). But what of Robert Langham, Keeper of the Council Chamber? As Kuin remarks, the claim that Langham was a Mercer can be checked:

while anyone could call himself a 'citizen and merchant', to call oneself, and one's correspondent, (as the author does) a Mercer implies identification. For the Mercers were, and are, one of the great Livery Companies of London; and such a reference can be checked (Kuin 12-3).

The records of the Mercers' Company reveal that a Robert Langham was admitted to the freedom of the Company in 1557 by apprenticeship. However, there is no evidence to prove that this person was Robert Langham, Keeper of the Council Chamber. In fact, Bradbrook is of the view that the two Robert Langhams were not one and the same (Scott 300), and that the author of the *Letter*, knowing that there was a Robert Langham who was a Mercer,

delibertely conflated him with Robert Langham, Keeper of the Council Chamber.

This brings us to a consideration of the third claim in the conclusion of the *Letter*, the claim that the Keeper of the Council Chamber was also a Merchant-Adventurer. This claim can also be checked against the historical records. If, as Kuin says, "to call oneself . . . a Mercer implies identification", even more so does calling oneself a Merchant-Adventurer.

Queen Mary's Charter of Incorporation of the Merchant-Adventurers of England of February 26th, 1555 lists the names of 101 individuals, including seven marquises, lords and earls; thirteen knights; ten London aldermen; and such rising political figures as Sir William Cecil and Nicholas Bacon (*CPR 1554-5*, 55-59).

Queen Elizabeth's Charter of Incorporation of the Governor, Assistants and Fellowship of Merchants Adventurers of England of July 18, 1564, lists only forty-nine names. However, a blanket provision at the end includes "all persons who have been admitted Freemen of the Company of Merchants Adventurers trading to Holland, Zealand or Flanders or should hereafter have been admitted by reason of patrimony or apprenticeship" (*CPR 1563-6*, 178-80). It is worth noticing that among the individuals named in Queen Elizabeth's charter are three persons related to Humfrey Martyn, the addressee of the *Letter*: his father, Sir Roger Martyn; his uncle, Lionel Duckett; and his relative by his father's second marriage, Edward Castelyn.

The men named in both charters were prominent citizens and wealthy individuals, and the enterprises on which they were engaged demanded the expenditure of substantial sums of money. Queen Mary's Charter, for example, recites that the Merchant-Adventurers:

have at their own adventure and costs provided, rigged and tackled certain ships, pinnaces and other vessels and have advanced them furnished with all things necessary to discover isles and lands unknown and not commonly frequented before this by the subjects of

the crown, which shall chance them sailing northwards, north-westwards and north-eastwards or any part in that course which other Christian monarchies in league and amity with the king and queen have not heretofore by seas frequented, to attain by this adventure both the glory of God and the increase of the general wealth of the realms of the king and queen and their subjects (CPR 1554-5, 57).

Was Robert Langham, Keeper of the Council Chamber, likely to have been a Merchant-Adventurer? The available evidence suggests a negative answer. His station in life is incompatible with membership in this group; with his minor official position at court, he does not appear to have moved in the circle of commercial magnates who comprised the Company of Merchant-Adventurers. Moreover, he is not named in either of the Charters of Incorporation. This latter point does not completely rule him out because of the blanket provision covering past and future members contained in Queen Elizabeth's Charter of July 18, 1564, but on balance it seems highly unlikely that the Robert Langham who was Keeper of the Council Chamber was a Merchant-Adventurer.

Interestingly, though, two of the four individuals to whom William Patten says he gave copies of the Langham *Letter* in September, 1575 -- William Cecil, Lord Burghley, and his brother-in-law Nicholas Bacon -- were Merchant-Adventurers. Both are named in Queen Mary's Charter of 1555.

In addition, Lord Burghley's son-in-law, Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, was, in a very practical sense, a merchant adventurer. Like other members of the nobility in the Elizabethan era, Oxford was a financial backer of voyages of exploration and trade, the most notable of these being Martin Frobisher's third voyage in search of the Northwest Passage and Captain Edward Fenton's 1582-3 voyage to the East Indies. Oxford invested £3000 in the former voyage and at least £500 in the latter (see issue #2 of the *Edward De Vere Newsletter*).

Thus, on the balance of probabilities, the author of the Langham *Letter* who signs himself a "Merchauntaventurer" is far more likely to have been Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, than Robert

Langham, Keeper of the Council Chamber.

The concluding paragraph of the Langham *Letter* thus allows us to see how the anonymous author used Robert Langham, Keeper of the Council Chamber, as a persona to cover his real identity. There was a real-life Robert Langham who was Keeper of the Council Chamber, and it is this real-life Robert Langham who was initially delighted to receive a copy of the *Letter*, and who wanted more copies given to him. Later, perhaps because the Queen herself, and Leicester, were displeased with the jaunty tone of the *Letter*, and with the possibility that it might turn the "honourable entertainment" into a "jest", Langham "complained" about the book, and the first edition was entirely suppressed. All of this is consistent with the hypothesis that the real author of the *Letter* was Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, who was hundreds of miles away in Italy in July 1575 when the Kenilworth entertainment took place, but who attempted to be there in spirit through the *Letter*.

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