

# EDWARD DE VERE NEWSLETTER NO. 37

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## Were the Calverley murders entirely unrelated to the play *A Yorkshire Tragedy*?

In issues #21-23 of the *Edward De Vere Newsletter*, the hypothesis was advanced that the Elizabethan drama *A Yorkshire Tragedy* is not based on the Calverley murders in Yorkshire. A recently published book by Edward Garnett, *The Calverley Murders: A Yorkshire Tragedy*, lends support to this position. Garnett does not set out to discredit the commonly accepted view. Yet, in presenting an analysis of the discrepancies between the play and historical fact, Garnett not only confirms the points raised in issue #21 of the *Edward De Vere Newsletter* but also identifies several additional discrepancies between the circumstances of the Calverley murders and the events depicted in the play.

For the reader's convenience, the points discussed earlier in the *Edward De Vere Newsletter* are summarized below, augmented with additional factual material drawn from *The Calverley Murders*:

1. According to historical records, the wardship of Walter Calverley was granted, firstly, on March 25, 1597 to his mother Katherine and his great-uncle William and, secondly, on June 23, 1598 to Lady Anne Gargrave of Nostell (second wife of Sir Cotton Gargrave), and her son, Sir Richard Gargrave (Garnett 18, 20, 42). These facts are in direct conflict with the statement in the play that Walter was the ward of his wife's uncle, a personage living in London at the time of the murders, and influential enough to be able to offer the Husband employment at court (Cawley 64, 69, 70).

2. The historical records also show that all the estates of Walter Calverley were put into trust on March 22, 1602 under the trusteeship of Sir John Brooke, Sir Edward Heron, Sir Robert Key, Sir Thomas Wentworth, Sir William Middleton and Richard Middleton. In addition, the records show that, although Walter Calverley did dispose of a number of parcels of land in 1601 and 1602, he transacted no major sales of land thereafter. Further, the surviving estate records for the year 1605 (the year of the Calverley murders) indicate that the Calverley estates were well-run, although the income for that period was so low as to be close to that of the "lesser gentry". Finally, there is no evidence whatever that Walter Calverley was a gambler; indeed, George Steevens noted in 1778 that "it is rather improbable that any place in Yorkshire in 1605 could have furnished gaming associations or people who attended to the poverty or affluence of such as frequented them" (Garnett 27-9, 33).

These facts negate any identification of Walter Calverley with the Husband in the play. The Husband is in desperate financial straits: he is said to have disposed of vast estates ("my lands showed like a full moon about me") and to have gambled away "thrice three thousand acres"; his lands are encumbered by a mortgage ("that mortgage sits like a snaffle upon mine inheritance"), and he is "withered with debts" and in the hands of "usurers" (Cawley 68-9, 76).

3. Another detail confirmed by the historical records is that Philippa Calverley's dowry consisted of money, not lands; furthermore, by 1605, the dowry

had already been spent (Garnett 42, 44). These facts contradict the scenes in the play in which the Husband attempts to force the Wife to sell her lands ("thy dowry shall be sold") (Cawley 62, 69, 71).

The foregoing points are in themselves sufficient cause for the suspicion that *A Yorkshire Tragedy* and the Calverley murders are unrelated. However, Garnett goes further in *The Calverley Murders*, and raises at least four additional points which provide convincing evidence that the Husband of the play is not modelled on the unfortunate Walter Calverley, and that the play's setting is somewhere other than Calverley Hall. The points raised by Garnett can be summarized as follows:

1. In *A Yorkshire Tragedy*, the final impetus to the Husband's desperate acts is the fact that his "brother at the university" has been imprisoned for his (the Husband's) debts. This "university brother" is mentioned no less than fourteen times and, in fact, the concluding lines of the play pun on the respective fates of the Husband and his brother ("Two brothers, one in bond lies overthrown/ This on a deadlier execution") (Cawley 54, 61, 71-6, 82, 86, 93). The records of Oxford and Cambridge, however, contain no mention of any member of the Calverley family enrolled circa 1605. It thus seems clear that Walter Calverley did not have a brother at either of the universities at the time of the murders. Garnett further points out that it is highly unlikely that Walter's brother William would have been preparing to enter the Church of England -- as is the Husband's brother in *A Yorkshire Tragedy* -- since William Calverley eventually married into a "prominent Catholic family" (Garnett 10, 19, 46).

2. Garnett also draws attention to the adulatory reference in *A Yorkshire Tragedy* to the Husband's father ("Thy father's and forefathers' worthy honours,/ Which were our country monuments"), a reference which is difficult to reconcile with the facts. Garnett tell us that Walter Calverley's father, William Calverley (1557-1596), was imprisoned in the Marshalsea in 1589, and that his (William's) father wrote to the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1589 pleading for William's release from prison on the

ground that he had been "of long time subject to lunacy" and that his "backwardness in religion" proceeded from "fantastical humour and weakness of wit". William was again arrested in 1596, and accused of making "very undutiful and disloyal speeches" (Garnett 12, 42; Cawley 65). These facts so little resemble the "worthy honours" referred to in the play that it appears beyond dispute that the father of the Husband in the play and the father of Walter Calverley were two entirely different people.

3. In *A Yorkshire Tragedy*, the Husband suggests that the Master from the University walk in the grounds of his house ("spend but a few minutes in a walk/ About my grounds below"). Garnett points out, however, that Calverley Hall did not have formal Elizabethan gardens, and was in fact situated in the village, surrounded by "fairly flat grassland" with "stables and cowsheds on the North West, a large orchard on the North East and the old village football field separating Hall from village" (Cawley 75; Garnett 47). Garnett also feels that it is unlikely that Calverley Hall ever had a gallery, a detail not referred to in the play but mentioned specifically in the so-called source pamphlet *Two Most Unnatural and Bloody Murders* (Garnett 47; Cawley 105). Even the staircase which figures so largely in the murder scene in *A Yorkshire Tragedy* cannot be located with any certainty in Calverley Hall (Garnett 49). All these details contribute to the impression that the entire layout of Calverley Hall little resembles the country house in *A Yorkshire Tragedy*.

4. In the play, the Husband is taken, after his capture, to the house of a "justice" (a Knight) who lives nearby ("bear him along to the justices/ A gentleman of worship dwells at hand"). According to the historical records of the case, the examining magistrate before whom Walter Calverley was taken was Sir John Savile of Howley Hall, near Morley. Garnett points out, however, that Savile's great house, "said to have been the most magnificent house ever built in that district", was not situated near Calverley (Cawley 86; Garnett 51). After a brief examination, the Knight orders the Husband to be taken to the jail ("Go lead him to the jail") and, on

the way to jail, the Husband passes by his house ("I am right against my house, seat of my ancestors"), where he encounters his Wife, sees his dead children laid out, and repents of what he has done (Cawley 88-9). The historical records show that Walter Calverley was taken to Wakefield Gaol. However, the Husband's journey in the play -- from the home of the "justice" to the jail, passing his own house on the way -- does not correspond to the geographical locations of Howley Hall, Wakefield Gaol, and Calverley Hall. As Garnett remarks:

the observation that the way to Wakefield [from Howley Hall] passed Calverley Hall is one of the clearest indications that the London writer had no idea where Calverley lay. The road, of course, goes in exactly the opposite direction (Garnett 53-4; Cawley 109).

Garnett also notices the fact that Walter Calverley's examination before Sir John Savile took place on April 24, the day after the murders; this was the same day the children were buried in Calverley Church. Garnett thus concludes that it is unlikely that Walter Calverley saw his two sons laid out for burial, as the Husband is said to do in *A Yorkshire Tragedy* (Garnett 54; Cawley 91).

The foregoing points make it clear that the correspondence between *A Yorkshire Tragedy* and the Calverley murders is confined to the following details: the Husband in the play -- the scion of a noted country family who was at one time a ward -- murders his two sons, injures his wife, and would have murdered a third child "at nurse" had he been able to do so. In all other respects, *A Yorkshire Tragedy* is completely at variance with the factual circumstances of the Calverley murders. The playwright is demonstrably unaware of the geographical location of Calverley as well as the physical layout of Calverley Hall. Similarly, he knows nothing of Walter Calverley's family, his habits, his financial situation or, most importantly, his psychological make-up. It is clear that *A Yorkshire Tragedy* is almost entirely inaccurate with respect to the facts of the Calverley murders, as is the so-called source pamphlet *Two Unnatural and Bloody Murders*, which merely repeats and embellishes the errors in the play.

For an accurate account of what really happened at Calverley, it is preferable to turn to Walter Calverley's examination before Sir John Savile and Sir Thomas Bland, as given by T.D. Whitaker in *Loidis and Elmete* (1816). This account of the murders differs significantly from the version found in *A Yorkshire Tragedy* and *Two Unnatural and Bloody Murders*. Unfortunately, Whitaker does not identify his source, and the original record of Walter Calverley's examination before the magistrates has not survived (Cawley 94, 111). However, Garnett is of the view that Whitaker's "whole account has a ring of truth about it" (52). As given by Cawley, Whitaker's account of the examination reads as follows:

*Walter Calverley, of Calverley, Esq. his examination for the murdering of his children.*

The Examination of Walter Calverley, of Calverley, in the West Riding of the County of York, Esq., taken before Sir John Savile, of Stowley, and Sir Thomas Bland, Kts. two of his Majesty's justices of peace, the 24th of April, 1605.

Being examined whether he did kill two of his own children, the name of the one thereof was William and the other Walter, saith, that he did kill them both at his own house at Calverley yesterday, being the 23rd day of April aforesaid. Being further examined what moved him to wound his wife yesterday, to that he said, that one Carver coming into the chamber where he was with his said wife, he commanded her to will the said Carver to go and fetch another son of his, whose name is Henry Calverley, who was nursed by the said Carver's wife, which she accordingly did; whereupon the said Carver went down into the court, and stayed there about a quarter of an hour, and returned again, but brought not the said child with him; and being commanded to go down again, he refused so to do, and that therefore he did wound his wife, if she be wounded. And being further examined, what he would have done to the said child if Carver had brought him, to that he said he would have killed him also. And being likewise examined whether at any time he had any intention to kill his said children, to that he said, that he hath had an intention to kill them for the whole space of two years past, and the reasons that moved him thereunto was, for that his said wife had many times theretofore uttered speeches and given signs and tokens unto him, whereby he might easily perceive and conjecture, that the said children were not by him begotten, and that he hath found himself to be in danger of his life sundry times by his wife.

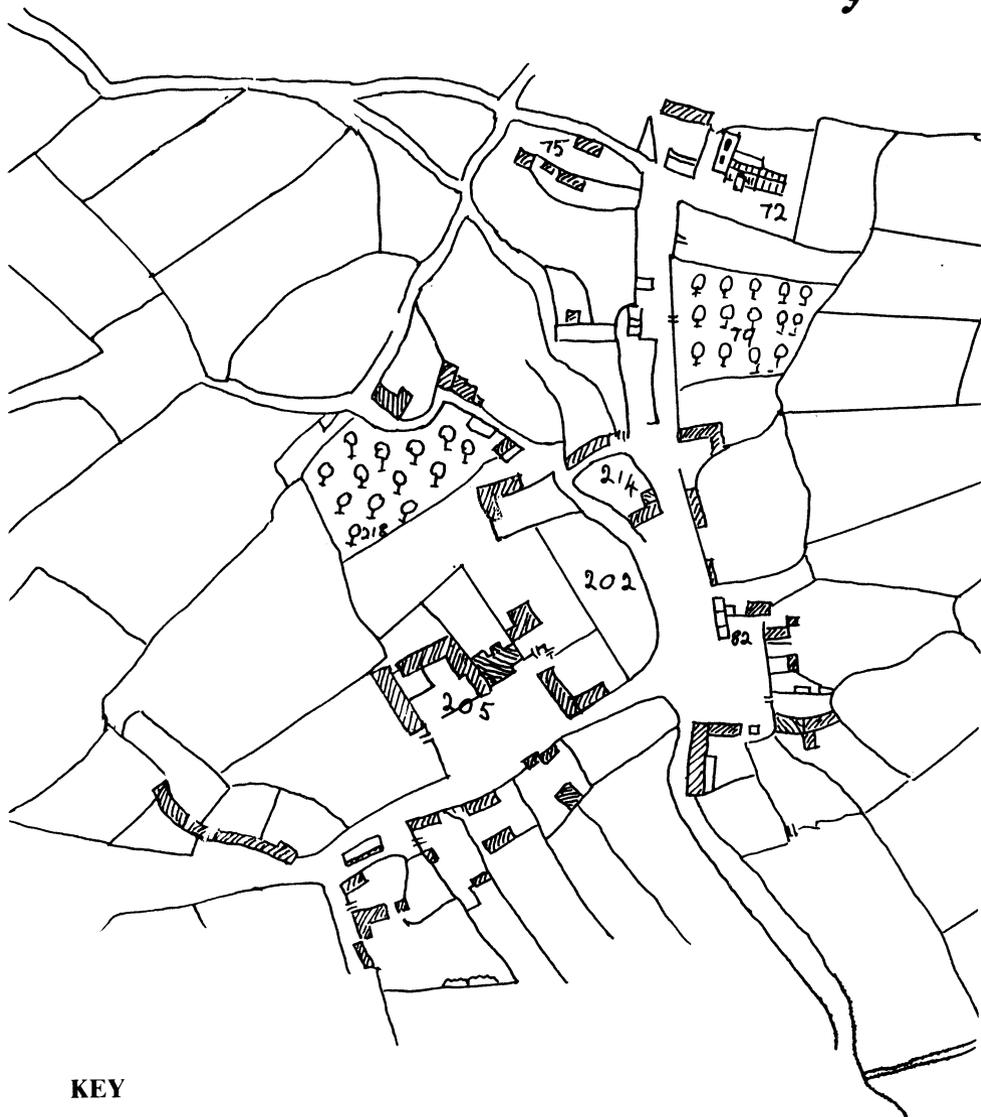
WALTER CALVERLEY.  
Capt' coram JOHN SAVILE.  
THO. BLAND (Cawley 111-2).

In attempting to assess the accuracy of this version of events, it is perhaps useful to cease entirely to think of the high drama of *A Yorkshire Tragedy*, and to focus on the harsh reality of what happened at Calverley Hall on April 23, 1605: a father -- who must have been at least temporarily deranged -- brutally murdered two of his young children and stabbed his wife. When questioned later, he offered wild excuses for his actions, and seems not even to have fully comprehended that his wife was injured. Does this lunatic behaviour square with what we know of Walter Calverley? Indeed, it does. It is on record that Walter Calverley's father was mentally unbalanced, and it seems Walter inherited this instability. Very shortly after his marriage, he was referred to by his mother-in-law, Anne Brooke, as "an unstayed young man" and, two years later, his estates were put in trust (Cawley 9-10). There may have been other reasons for the trusteeship, but one of the more probable explanations is that Walter Calverley was at that time incapable of managing his affairs. Unfortunately for his wife and children, Walter Calverley's mental state appears to have deteriorated until, having by his own account brooded on imaginary wrongs and dangers for two years, he erupted into irrational violence against his children. Whitaker's account is thus far more compatible with Walter Calverley's mental state at the time of the murders than is the entirely allegorical tale in *A Yorkshire Tragedy* of the Husband who, driven to desperation by imminent financial ruin and disgrace, decides to kill his children rather than see them live to be "beggars" (Cawley 78, 80-1, 85, 88, 91). It is therefore to Walter Calverley's examination before the magistrates that we must look for a historically and psychologically accurate account of the Calverley murders. Similarly, *A Yorkshire Tragedy*, must be interpreted on its own merits, and not in relation to a historical event to which it is entirely unrelated.

### Works Cited

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# Calverley



## KEY

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|-----|-----------------------------------------|-----|----------------|
| 72  | Parish Church                           | 202 | Football Garth |
| 75  | Vicarage                                | 218 | Great Orchard  |
| 79  | Shepherd's Orchard                      | 205 | Calverley Hall |
| 214 | Leopard Inn<br>(now The Thornhill Arms) | 82  | The Green      |