

A NOTE ON DAME DOROTHY SELBY AND GUNPOWDER PLOT.

By THE REV. D. BARRY, M.A.

As far as I am aware, no one has ever yet been able definitely to say who wrote the letter to Lord Monteagle, revealing the Gunpowder Plot. Numerous ideas and assertions on the subject have been advanced, but nevertheless it still remains for some authority to arise who will definitely and historically determine this vexed question. Now there is in the village church of Ightham a very interesting monument to the memory of Dame Dorothy Selby, wife of Sir William Selby, once owner of the Mote, and I venture to advance the theory that possibly Dame Dorothy had something to do in making the plot known to Lord Monteagle, or what is the meaning of those words we find recorded on her monument :

“ Whose art disclosed that plot which had it taken,
Rome had triumphed and Britain's walls had shaken.”

There was also allusion to her “ pen of steel and silk ” and other things which appeared to indicate that the letter was executed in needlework.

We must bear in mind that the monument was not erected for nearly forty years after the discovery of the plot, when concealment of the discloser of the plot would not be so necessary. My reason for considering that Dame Dorothy may possibly have been the means of laying bare the atrocious plot is chiefly centered in that word “ *disclosed* ” which forms part of the epitaph. If the lines quoted above merely refer to her needlework (she was, I believe, a great tapestry worker) why should the word “ *disclosed* ” be used. We must also bear in mind that the monument together with the inscription was erected by Dame Dorothy's children, and we can hardly imagine children writing a lie on their mother's tomb.

Undoubtedly it would have been a dangerous thing for the author of the anonymous letter to have disclosed either his or her identity at the time, but after the lapse of 30 or 40 years the danger would almost, if not entirely, have disappeared. If, in course of time, it transpires that Dame Dorothy was an active agent in disclosing the plot, the village of Ightham will become a still more interesting spot, historically, than at present, and visitors will come in even greater numbers to visit the parish church, which may fairly claim both architecturally and from its beautiful position to be a typical English village church, and one of which the parishioners are justly proud.

I am not a member of the Royal Archaeological Institute, neither have I the pen of a ready writer; I simply advance the above theory for what it is worth at the request of one of its members.