



RUINS OF THE PRIOR'S 'CAMERA,' MUGGLESWICK.

(From a photograph of 1911, by Mr. Joseph Oswald.)

VI.—A DURHAM AND NEWCASTLE PLOT IN 1663.

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[Read on the 28th February, 1917.]

I must take you back to the early days of king Charles II which are sometimes called 'the golden days,' but here in Newcastle and Durham prove to have been clouded over with a good deal of anxiety whilst a dangerous and widespread plot was being concocted, a plot which had connexions with all parts of England and Wales.¹ It has largely escaped the notice of historians, though not entirely, for Mr. Surtees in his *History of Durham* incorporated in his addenda to the second volume² some references to what he called the 'Derwentdale Plot' or the 'Muggleswick conspiracy,' giving it these names because in that remote district of the county of Durham, some at all events of the local plotters were wont to meet. His own account of the origin of the movement runs as follows: 'It was by no means,' he says, 'confined to the north. The Dissenters saw with natural regret the temporal sceptre wrested from their grasp and restored to a family whom they might well consider a Moabitish race; and it would be vain to deny that the sudden revulsion of feeling which attended the Restoration carried the nation from a state of sullen and unnatural gloom into a flood of profligate joy, well calculated to give scandal to persons of much more liberal habits than the

¹ The general authority for the facts stated in this paper is the *State Papers, Domestic, Charles II*, to which references have been given in the foot-notes. *Add. MS. 3370* in the British Museum is particularly important for the northern counties. *The Diary of Ambrose Barnes* (Surtees Soc. publ. vol. 50) is useful for Newcastle; *Cosin's Correspondence*, vol. II. (*Ibid.* vol. 55) for Durham; *Depositions from York Castle* (*Ibid.* vol. 40) for Yorkshire. See a paper by the present writer on the wider connexions of the plot in *Proceedings of Royal Hist. Soc.* for 1917.

² *Op. cit.* vol. II, p. 389.

Dissenters. To the latter the cup of tribulation was filled up by the Bartholomew Act, which, if it silenced some preachers of sedition, also drove from their pulpits many divines of tried character and undissembled piety, of whose speculative opinions no lawful government need have stood in fear.³ To this explanation of the rise of the plot Surtees adds some informations which were extracted from men arrested in this locality, the general tendency of which is, as he interprets the documents, to minimize the danger of the plot and to throw discredit upon the persons examined, as also upon the evidence they gave.⁴ As I hope to show, the general movement was one of real peril to the nation, and that portion of it concerned with this neighbourhood, which was the first part⁵ of a large set piece to explode, possesses in addition a somewhat romantic side. Indeed the north country portion of the general plot exploded more than once, as we shall see, and after the explosion left so much smouldering and smoke that when the worst was over the gentry and freeholders met together in Durham and Northumberland, and bound themselves 'to be ready with horses and arms and withal the free assistance that we can procure from our neighbours to repair unto such place or places as shall be appointed us, and at our own voluntary charge for the space of so many days more or less as need shall require.'⁶ Nor did the movement approach its end until stern legislation was enacted and the still greater alarm of the plague, of the Dutch war and of the French menace, turned men's minds from such schemes to the absorption of graver dangers.

I shall not trouble you with the evidence of seditious assemblies and agitations which occurred in various parts of the kingdom soon after the Restoration, and called forth a proclamation⁷ against seditious meetings, under which many were dispersed. The local story begins with the proceedings of two men

³ *Op. cit.* vol. II, p. 389.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Cf. Cosin Corr.* II, 107, from *S. P. Dom.* 91, 81.

⁶ *Mickleton MSS.*, Durh. Univ. Lib., 31 f. 77.

⁷ Jan. 10, 1660/1. *S. P. Dom.*

who were a pair of arch-plotters in this neighbourhood, though by no means the only local conspirators that can be named. First of all there was lieut. colonel Paul Hobson, who in the new model army of Fairfax had served as a captain under that distinguished leader, and in 1648 was appointed deputy governor of Newcastle-upon-Tyne.⁸ During the Protectorate he appears to have lived at Sacriston near Durham, and to have taken a personal and regulative interest in the religious settlement of the neighbourhood when the church lands were sold off and a puritan university was erected in Durham.⁹ He also had some hand in the establishment of anabaptist congregations in this district.¹⁰ The Restoration must have been gall and wormwood to him with its unconditional restoration of the church, and it was not long before he set to work to plot against the new order of things. It would seem that he operated chiefly in London,¹¹ but owing to a correspondence with friends in Durham which was intercepted and found its way to the bishop as lord lieutenant,¹² he was betrayed and was committed to prison in London. He was released on bail, and gave himself up with redoubled energy and astuteness to forwarding the design in the north, which he aided by a vigorous correspondence from London. 'He played double,' says a later examinee, 'pretending to discover the plot but advancing it by all means possible.'¹³

The other personage is John Joplin who was probably his chief correspondent in the north. This man, who represents a family long resident in the city of Durham,¹⁴ had been gaoler at Durham

⁸ See Brand's *History*, I, 523, *sub. ann.*

⁹ I am, however, quite prepared to find that this man who figures in the history of the Durham college (Hutchinson, *Hist. Durh.*) was his father.

¹⁰ See David Douglas, *History of the Northern Baptist Churches*, 1846, *passim*. There are some further particulars in the Hanserd Knollys Society's publications. A portrait of Hobson exists in Matthew Mackey's collection. The writer is indebted to Mr. A. M. Oliver for some of these details.

¹¹ Proof of this is given in the references to his name in *S. P. Dom.*

¹² *Cos.* 99-100. *S. P. Dom.* 63, 34.

¹³ *Ibid.* 84, 64, *cf.* 82, 106.

¹⁴ The parish registers of Durham *passim*.

during the Protectorate. At the Restoration he was dispossessed of his post, and turned his attention to the network of conspiracy which soon began to be woven in Durham and Northumberland. Now he takes part in the Booth rising; now he is abroad corresponding with the English sectaries; now he writes from London; now he is in Durham receiving letters from Hobson who is in London; and once more, at the very beginning of 1663, he is sued by the crown in the king's bench for treasonable practices.¹⁵ Of this restless and extraordinary agitator we have a sort of character sketch in a letter written by dean Carleton of Carlisle who had been and still was prebendary of Durham.¹⁶ From this it appears that Joplin was a shrewd and able fellow, on very good terms with important people in the neighbourhood, who were inclined to shield him and even to encourage him in his schemes and with whom he was in constant correspondence in the days that this conspiracy was being put into shape.

The scene now shifts to the valley of the Derwent. Muggleswick park¹⁷ was an ancient *refugium* of the prior of Durham, where on the edge of the moors prior Hugh in Edward I's days had built a lodge with hall and chapel, some ruins of which remain to-day.¹⁸ The district was the home of one of the earliest anabaptist churches in the north, which was formed by one John Ward in the times of religious commotion which preceded the Restoration.¹⁹ Whether this fact or the remoteness and security of the district prove to be the determining cause, Muggleswick park in the latter months of 1662 became one centre, if not the head centre in the north, for developing a really dangerous plot. In this inaccessible spot men of no great social distinction, but in deadly earnest, met at intervals during the autumn and winter months of 1662 to confer together, to receive

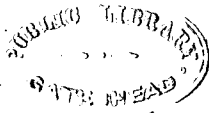
¹⁵ *S. P. Dom.* 103, 110, 1. *Ibid.* 63, 34.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 103, 110.

¹⁷ Surtees, *Hist. Durh.* II, p. 361.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 364. See illustration of 'camera,' as it was in 1911, on p. 144.

¹⁹ See David Douglas, *Northern Baptist Churches*, pp. 31, 51.



communications as I think it probable from Paul Hobson and others in London, and to bind themselves and all fresh confederates by an oath of secrecy not to divulge their design. We have the names of some of those who met at different houses in the neighbourhood, where they settled their final arrangements for a rising to take place on Lady day, 1663.²⁰ And what was their design? They proposed 'to rise in rebellion against the government, and to destroy the present parliament; to murder all bishops, deans, and chapters, and all other ministers of the church; to break all organs; and further to kill all the gentry that should either oppose them or not join with them; to destroy the common prayer books and to pull down all churches. They intended to fall first upon Durham, and to seize any ammunition or money that might be there. Their boast was that many thousands of anabaptists and independents were to join with them, and with these they were in daily correspondence.'²¹

It will be observed that their conspiracy was sufficiently bloodthirsty. John Joplin of Durham was at this final meeting²² and, if we may conjecture, it was his part to lay before his fellow-conspirators the most recent advices from Hobson and other confederates, and, as far as we know, perfect unanimity prevailed. There is scarcely sufficient evidence to show in detail how far the conspirators expected miracles to happen,²³ and how far they had made really adequate provision of arms and ammunition. In this latter connexion something certainly had been prepared. A certain Lewis Frost of South Shields, a shipmaster, and one who is intimately connected with the rise of the northern baptist churches, had some supply, at all events, ready against the expected day.²⁴ It was resolved, however, to defer the undertaking for a month or two, by which time they expected parliament

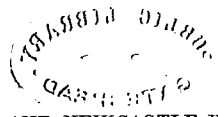
²⁰ Surtees, *Hist. Durh.* II, 389. *Add. MS.* 3370.

²¹ *S. P. Dom. Cor.* 2, 70, 13. *Cf. Cos. Corr.* 314.

²² *S. P. Dom.* 103, 110, 1.

²³ They did expect them. *Cf. Ibid.* 97, 63.

²⁴ Douglas, *op. cit.* p. 61. *Cf. Cosin Corr.* 314, from *S. P. Dom.* 96, 69.



to have declared its policy, and meanwhile looked for an accession of numbers.²⁵

But there was one man present at Muggleswick who was seized by qualms of conscience, or, as he afterwards said, he was 'troubled in conscience at the horrid resolutions of those of his own persuasion and other separatists.'²⁶ He took lady Mallory into his confidence, and by her she introduced him²⁷ to the famous Dr. Basire,²⁸ rector of Stanhope and archdeacon of Northumberland, and he in turn advised this man, whose name was Ellerington, to see bishop Cosin at Auckland and made a full confession of the whole plot to the lord lieutenant, who with his deputy lieutenants had long been anxious about rumoured plottings. The conference ended in the arrest of the informant and some eight of his anabaptist brethren. Ellerington was, later on, bribed to mingle again with his recent colleagues and to reveal all that he knew or was able to discover, so that he turns up at intervals with fresh evidence in all the long and intricate story of espionage that spreads over the next two or three years.

The revelations of Ellerington were a severe blow to the anabaptist church on the Derwent. Some members, as we have just seen, were arrested, but others fled, and could nowhere be found, escaping, it was supposed, to the inaccessible parts of Northumberland or into Scotland,²⁹ with which some of the sectaries at Newcastle had been in correspondence.³⁰ One fugitive who was badly wanted was a certain captain Thomas Gower,³¹ who is said to have been one of the founders of the anabaptist cause in Newcastle³² along with his great friend colonel Paul Hobson. Gower had made his way to London, where he was probably with Hobson, watching developments, and associating with the anabaptist 'gathered congregations' as they called them in

²⁵ *S. P. Dom.* 81, 77.

²⁷ D. and C. Durh. Hunter MSS. 9, 172.

²⁸ For Basire cf. *Life*, by Dr. Darnell.

³⁰ *Ibid.* Sep. 30, 1662.

³¹ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.* 98, 34.

²⁹ *S. P. Dom.* 70, 58.

³² Douglas, *op. cit.*

Coleman street, Crutched friars, and Fleet street.³³ The news of the discovery of the plot caused some excitement in Newcastle, owing, we may presume, to the notoriety of Hobson and Gower in this town, and the lurking sympathy with the anabaptist cause of which there is some proof in Newcastle at that time; and, probably, still more was this excitement due to a real connexion between the Derwent anabaptists and friends in Newcastle.³⁴ As for Ellerington, whom we may now dismiss, he proved to be a useful spy for some two years after his first introduction to the bishop, and an object of intense loathing to the party whom he had betrayed.³⁵ He flew at high game, indeed, for in his informations he implicated men of county position such as captain Mitford of Mitford, captain Shipperdson of Pittington Hallgarth, Timothy Whittingham of Holmside, Fenwick of Stanton, and others.³⁶ Some of these gentlemen were even thrown into prison.

The dispersion of the Muggleswick plotters in March, 1663, was by no means the end of the plot. Envoys found their way to London from the north, and in London, no doubt, they met with their old friends Hobson, Joplin, and Gower. Correspondence was also kept up with other sympathizers in Yorkshire.³⁷ Vigorous organization proceeded with groups in various parts of England, and committees were formed. Into that long and detailed story we must not go, and it must be enough to say that by degrees a coherent design was formed in which all the contributory groups in various parts of England were to have their part. London was to be the head-centre of this large and universal scheme,³⁸ which contemplated nothing less than to surprise the Tower, and Whitehall, and to kill the king, the duke of Albemarle, the duke of York, the lord chancellor, and others.³⁹ This outwent the more modest programme of the original Durham

³³ Douglas, *op. cit.*

³⁴ *S. P. Dom* 70, 56-7.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 136, 48.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 96, 69. Cf. *Cosin Corr.* ii, 314, with notes.

³⁷ *S. P. Dom.* 81, 77.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 86, 20.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 115, 36, 1.

and Newcastle conspirators, but it actually became the purpose of confederates all over England. We now lose sight of the northerners whilst the scheme was being drafted, until June, when the envoys returned from London to communicate their plans to their friends.⁴⁰ The north-country confederates held a series of meetings after Whitsuntide in Yorkshire at Harrogate, where they pretended to have come to drink the waters at what even then was a celebrated spa; at Pannal, Leeds, Stank⁴¹ house. At some of these meetings, Joplin made his appearance to represent Durham, and so did many others who were to take part in the rising—men from Yorkshire, Lancashire, Westmorland, Cumberland, and Scotland, and as well as from Durham and Northumberland. It had been agreed, probably before the envoys came from London, that the north should strike first.⁴² With this point settled, it was determined by the Durham and Newcastle contingents to seize Tynemouth castle, and Newcastle itself,⁴³ and when this was accomplished, to take Durham and make it a garrison, and then to march on into Yorkshire and capture York early in August at the time of the Lammas assizes. As the fateful week approached, it was known to the vigilant deputy lieutenants and their superiors that there was great activity on the north of the Tees. ‘The chief place is near Durham,’⁴⁴ says the high sheriff of Yorkshire, on 1 August. Two days later he reports that some kind of mysterious correspondence is being carried on with Newcastle and Scotland.⁴⁵ All this on the eve almost of the assize day. And then this same high sheriff delivered as skilful a blow as ever was contrived. It was necessary at all costs to crush the design with the least possible confusion and alarm. Accordingly, under the powers given by the proclamation against seditious meetings, ‘about 100 of the chief

⁴⁰ *S. P. Dom.* 81, 77.

⁴² *S. P. Dom.* 97, 63, and 97, 18,

⁴³ *Add.* 33*b*. Possibly this was the October plan (*infra* p. 154), and not in August.

⁴⁴ *S. P. Dom.* 78, 6.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 97, 98, and *Add. MS.* 3370.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 78, 16.

designers and old officers were taken in two days and brought to York.⁴⁶ Not a word was said about any plot, and no suspicion was roused that the authorities knew the bottom of the matter by this time. Those arrested were examined, their secrets discovered, and they were set free on good security upon condition that they gave information of any further proceedings. And that was not all, for troops were dispatched from the south in order to enter York upon the very day proposed for the assault.⁴⁷ John Joplin had returned to Durham to help forward, no doubt, the bishopric part in the design. His friend Paul Hobson wrote at once to tell him that the troops were being sent northwards,⁴⁸ imagining that it could only be by some miracle that the authorities had been informed of what was going forward. The alarm was given to the rebels, and the design of marching on York⁴⁹ was abandoned. But further arrests were made in Darlington,⁵⁰ whilst at Newcastle the corporation wrote to tell bishop Cosin that they had 'issued warrants for examining and securing all persons that cannot give a good account of their business.'⁵¹ And one important arrest was actually made at Newcastle when Sir Dugald Campbell was apprehended, and was found to be in correspondence with a strong covenanting faction in Scotland.⁵²

Thus, for the second time, the designs of the local participants in this conspiracy went awry, and the credit of its failure lies with Sir Thomas Gower, the high sheriff of Yorkshire. But, once more, the plotting was not crushed. The numerous correspondents believed that the authorities were unaware of the scheme as a whole, and that Gower's arrests merely concerned men who had taken part in illegal meetings. By degrees, during the remainder of the summer, details were arranged for a still more perfectly organized rising, which was timed to take place

⁴⁶ *S. P. Dom.* 81, 77.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 79, 123.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 97, 63.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 78, 63.

⁵¹ *Mickleton MSS.* 31, f. 69.

⁵² *S. P. Dom.* 80, 137.

all over England simultaneously at the beginning of Michaelmas term, on Monday, 12th October. The former plan of a rising in the north to roll steadily and overwhelmingly up to London was abandoned, and eventually the complete new programme was ready. Envoys were sent from the committee in London to all the county centres giving them final instructions.⁵³ The watchful Gower wrote to the bishop of Durham telling him that the bishopric rebels intended to seize him, his treasure, and that of the dean and chapter. For this purpose they had 300 horse ready, and foot enough to surprise Newcastle.⁵⁴ It was computed that in the four northern counties 10,000 persons were concerned in the forthcoming enterprise.⁵⁵ The northern contingents were to seize Newcastle, and other important places north of the Humber. They were supposed to have ships riding about Newcastle,⁵⁶ and the conspirators expected to make sure of their immediate objective in a night. All the places of rendezvous were fixed and each band knew, or was supposed to know, its route and its part in the scheme. Commanders and subalterns had been ordered all over the country, and the rebel leaders were all fully instructed and posted in their duties.

Again the fateful day drew near, but, very shortly before it, the mistake was made which ruined the whole compact and organized scheme. The rising was postponed for a fortnight,⁵⁷ owing partly to dissidence at headquarters, and partly to the hope of gaining greater numbers by delay. That fortnight gave the lord lieutenants time to throw their net widely. In the north about 90 of the principal agitators were seized and carried to York castle.⁵⁸ We have full lists of these and of their fellows.⁵⁹ Months followed in which justices made examination of them, and the prisoners were, as a rule, remanded to the next assize. There were hot alarms in Newcastle when the fate of the rising

⁵³ *S. P. Dom.* 81, 77.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 80, 107.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 80, 115.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 80, 139.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 81, 77.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 99, 110, 1.

was known. The train-bands were marched out to prevent any demonstration, and the volunteer corps of Sir Francis Liddell presented themselves in the market place even before the drums beat.⁶⁰ But the local precautions were deemed unnecessary and the soldiers were soon disbanded.⁶¹ And yet this cheery optimism on the part of the military in Northumberland was scarcely justified. At all events, a fortnight later the deputy lieutenants of the town of Newcastle entered into recognizance with some twenty-seven persons who were put under bond not to plot against government, and to appear for a whole year upon reasonable summons.⁶² These names do not convey much to me, but I think it will be found that they represent the leaders of the anabaptist church in Newcastle which is known to have been founded about 1650.⁶³ A fortnight later still the mayor apprehended several suspicious persons, which event led to a general house-to-house illumination, for 'the whole town had every man his lantern hanging at his window into the street till morning.'⁶⁴ The dean of Carlisle describes both Durham and Newcastle as unquiet and requiring far more stringent measures to allay the general insecurity.⁶⁵

The preliminary examinations of prisoners seem to have been well advanced by the end of the year. The cases referred were tried at the various assizes during 1664. Some of the chief ring-leaders appear to have been executed in London at once.⁶⁶ A batch of twenty-one northerners were condemned to death at York in January. Some of these were executed there, others at Leeds, and their heads were sent to various northern towns.⁶⁷ In April there were some further executions. But in the main the most astonishing leniency was shown towards the rebels, a leniency which was much criticized afterwards, and strongly

⁶⁰ *S. P. Dom.* 81, 79-80.

⁶³ D. Douglas, *op. cit.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 90, 95.

⁶¹ *Mickleton MSS.* 31, f. 68.

⁶⁴ *S. P. Dom.* 83, 81.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* 91, 4.

⁶² *S. P. Dom.* 82, 87.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* 86, 18, 1.

objected against bishop Cosin who was even said to promote and favour men who were if not implicated in the plot, at all events benevolent towards the plotters.⁶⁸ However the arch-plotters in Northumberland and Durham escaped with their lives. Hobson found his way to the Tower, and was transferred thence to Chepstow castle, whence he petitioned in August, 1664 'a poor perishing prisoner,' as he called himself, to be transported to Jamaica,⁶⁹ and there, I presume, he died. Joplin was much helped by local intervention and managed to gain his discharge,⁷⁰ but I have not yet discovered what ultimately became of him. Other local prisoners seem to have been set at liberty sooner or later after longer or shorter terms of imprisonment.

But I must stop. We have traced the local connexion of a really formidable plot. I have only two things to add. The plotting did not cease. It still went on, for many of the agitators fled to Holland or elsewhere, and corresponded vigorously with friends in England.⁷¹ It was only the general alarm caused by graver dangers—the plague, the Dutch war, the menace of Louis XIV—that by degrees taught the agitators to suspend their conspiracies in face of a common danger. But that is a long story, to which it may be possible to return some day in order to trace its local history. The other matter is this. Fierce invective has been poured on the government of Charles II for the 'Conventicle Act' which was passed during the very days that this recrudescence of plotting began. My paper will have shown that the 'Conventicle Act' of 1664 was really necessary. It was not passed in order to silence John Bunyan and his friends, but to crush, perhaps, the most dangerous political and religious fanaticism that English history records, which found its chief maintenance in sectarian meetings.⁷²

⁶⁸ Surtees. *Hist. Durh.* II, 391, and *S. P. Dom.* 86, 18, 1, and 103, 110.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* 101, 63.

⁷⁰ See dean Carleton's letter, *ibid.* 103, 110, and the letter of Neile, Surtees, II, 391.

⁷¹ There are full traces in the *S. P. Dom.* ⁷² Cf. *Trans. Bapt. Hist. Soc.*, I, 154.