

SERVICE OF THANKSGIVING FOR LORD BURGHLEY

By Alexander Waugh

An invitation-only service of thanksgiving ‘to celebrate the birth and lasting memory of the Right Honourable William Cecil Lord Burghley KG, 1520–1598’ was attended by over 1,000 people at Westminster Abbey on 22 June 2022. The Royal Family was represented by HRH Princess Alexandra, while the senior representative of Lord Burghley’s male line, the Marquess of Exeter, who lives in America, was represented by his distant cousin, the Marquis of Salisbury, seated by the Princess. Dame Eleanor Laing MP, Deputy Speaker, represented the Speaker of the House of Commons and Undersheriff Biago Fraulo represented the High Sheriff of Greater London.

I gallantly represented The de Vere Society, sitting in the South Transept right next to the 1740 Shakespeare Monument beneath which (recent evidence suggests) are buried the mortal remains of the most brilliant member of Lord Burghley’s family – his son-in-law Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford.

The service was conducted by Dr David Hoyle, Dean of Westminster, who is aware of the current discussion of Vere’s burial beneath the Shakespeare monument but, wary of embroiling the Abbey in the authorship controversy, will not permit the matter to be properly investigated. It was in 2002 under Hoyle’s predecessor, Dr Wesley Carr, that the Abbey was last mired in the authorship question by controversially installing a memorial glass panel to Christopher Marlowe in Poets’ Corner that questioned the date of his death: ‘1564 Christopher Marlowe ?1593’. Professor Stanley Wells remarked at the time that the implications of this legend were ‘peculiarly stupid’.

The last line of all five verses of the first hymn ‘one Church, one Faith, one Lord’ was faintly reminiscent of Burghley’s personal motto ‘cor unum, via una’ (‘one heart, one way’) recently shown by Dr Richard Waugaman to have been taken from the Book of Jeremiah (32:39): *Et dabo eis cor unam, et viam unam ut timeant me universis diebus* (‘And I will give them one heart and one way that they may fear me forever.’) In his tribute to Burghley, historian Dr David Starkey reminded the congregation of his lack of interest in music, his fear of God, his political canniness

and his important legacy, ending with an emotional plea to us all to ‘put the brakes on change before thoughtless progress undoes the work of Cecil and 500 years’. The choir and musicians of the London Viols played several pieces by Edward de Vere’s protégé William Byrd, including his *Fantasia in C*, his *The Leaves be Green* and his *Pavan for the Earl of Salisbury*. A fine address was given by Lord Chartres of Wilton who, mildly contradicting David Starkey, explained how Burghley’s patronage of Gabriel Goodman, Dean of Westminster (1528–1601) led directly to the Church of England’s becoming more hospitable to high ceremony and complex music.

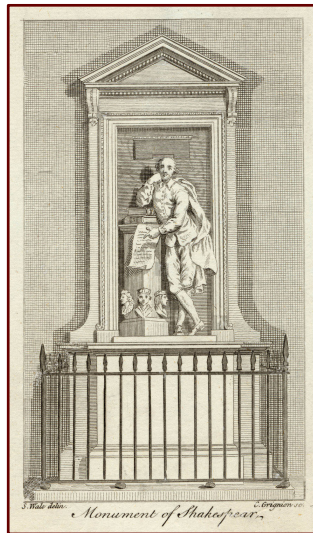
The event was promoted by the ‘Burghley 500 Foundation’ whose patron is the Prince of Wales, under the auspices of the Marquis of Salisbury and Miranda Rock, who is Lord Exeter’s first cousin once removed. Mrs Rock currently resides at Burghley House, the magnificent stately pile built by Burghley between 1555 and 1587, situated just outside the town of Stamford in Lincolnshire. Lord Salisbury’s principal seat is Hatfield House, Hertfordshire, exchanged by King James I for Theobalds, a grand house built on land acquired by Lord Burghley from the theatrical family of Burbage.

Readings were given by Lord Salisbury, his son and heir Viscount Cranborne, and his brother, Lord Valentine Cecil, with further contributions from Lords Benyon, Rockley and Barnard. The highlight and emotional heart of the service was an anthem by Scottish composer James Macmillan, sung by the Special Service Choir of Westminster Abbey. It was a plaintive setting of words from Psalm 25 which sounded especially moving given the large number of Burghley’s well-dressed and well-heeled descendants giving it their rapt attention in the pews:

What man is he that feareth the Lord ... His soul shall dwell at ease
and his seed shall inherit the land ... His seed shall be mighty upon the
earth ... Riches and plenteousness shall be in his house and his
righteousness endureth for ever.

It was not suggested that we pray for Lord Burghley’s soul and the darker sides of his nature were never mentioned. Instead, the congregation was invited to give thanks for a remarkable, beneficent life and legacy. I wonder how many in the Abbey gave thanks in their prayers, as I did, to the man who brought up and

educated Shakespeare to the highest standards and who, by managing the dramatist's affairs and constantly interfering and poking his nose into his private life, contributed quite by accident to the formation of the finest literary mind the world has ever known? This is surely Burghley's greatest legacy. For 500 years he has lain dead for a ducket in St Martin's Church, Stamford, a hundred miles or so from where his wife, his daughter Anne, Countess of Oxford and his son-in-law, Edward de Vere, were buried at Westminster Abbey. When that tomb is rent and Time dissolves his Stamford monument, when his political achievements, his virtues and his failings are all forgotten, then shall his spirit still be kept alive in his son-in-law's immortal creation, that slippery, double-hearted, long-winded, pedantic moralist statesman and 'tedious old fool', Polonius.



See Alexander Waugh's video 'Scandal at the Abbey' at:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uDI1fct74HC4&t=677s>

