

# The Earl of Essex's chaplain: Rev. Abdias Assheton



Anne Falloon, Middleton Archaeological Society

## Introduction

Abdias Assheton (1563-1633) was a member of Middleton's manorial family who rose to some prominence in the final years of Elizabeth I's reign. A Protestant with strong Puritan leanings, as an academic and preacher he sought all his answers not from centuries old tradition as his Catholic forebears had done, but directly from a deep reading of the bible. In the 1590's his approach to thinking through religious and moral choices using scripture attracted the attention of the greatest man in England.

This is the story of the controversial relationship between Essex and the influential chaplain he called his 'little man', Abdias Assheton.

## The Asshetons and religion

In the mid 16<sup>th</sup> century, members of the Assheton <sup>1</sup> family were faced with the decision everyone in the country had to consider: to accept the new state religion or adhere to the old one. There were costs attached to remaining faithful. Staunch Catholics felt they were risking their souls without the rituals of confessing to a priest and receiving the actual body and blood of Christ. As the century progressed, there were increasing worldly costs of not conforming in Elizabeth's England. Catholic recusants who refused to attend church or take communion were heavily fined. Noble and gentry families could afford to pay, but only the wealthiest were able to continue losing income indefinitely. The majority of people opted for safety: committed Anglican Protestants conformed with enthusiasm, but others, the Calvinists and Puritans, were still nursing the ambition of purifying the English church still further. A sharper choice faced the professional clergy when Queen Elizabeth ascended the throne in 1558. A man aspiring to be a priest in the English church could not prevaricate: orthodoxy was required.

No records exist for the religious choices made by lords of the manor such as Sir Richard Assheton (1482-1549), the hero of Flodden Field, or his son Richard Assheton (1511-50) or grandson Richard (1536-63). The last of these men lived through the terrible years of Queen Mary's attempt to turn back the clock and re-establish the Catholic faith. The case of old Sir Richard's granddaughter, Margaret Assheton (1544-1609), is known though. As a child in the 1550's, her father married her into the Anglican Davenport family, but she chose to become and remain a recusant until her death. Possibly her mother, Anne Bellingham who was from a Catholic family in Westmoreland, influenced her. Margaret's life involved significant sacrifice: she had to pay increasing recusancy fines and lost property as a result; she lived in a form of internal exile for thirty years; and she sent two sons to Spain to train as priests where they both died young during her lifetime.

For other members of the Assheton family, there are some clues to the choices they made. Another son of old Sir Richard, Robert Assheton (1515-1563), was rector of Middleton from 1538 until he resigned the post in 1559. In his time, there must have been hope still that

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<sup>1</sup> The surname was spelled 'Ashton' or 'Asheton' in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. I use the modern version in the main text and the contemporary 'Ashton' or 'Assheton' in quotations.

the old church would return. The Chester visitation of 1548 noted a number of clergy still working at St Leonard's, one of whom was the elderly Thomas Mawdesley, master of the Grammar school. The old man's will dated 12 March 1554, one year into Mary's reign, is the work of a man faithful to the Roman church, asking to be buried in the saint's chapel near his old Rector, 'Meister Claydon':

*My sawll to Almyghtye God His blessyd Moder and Mayd oure Ladye and all the blessyd cumpany of heven and my corpse to be beryed afore the awter on the northe syde in the Chappell of Seynt Cudbert under the blew stone and nere-my Meister Claydon<sup>i</sup>*

1559 was the year when the new queen's government introduced the Act of Uniformity, which required all ministers to use the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, the only state-approved text to be used in holy worship. Refusal to conform was not an option according to the Act:

*... if any manner of parson, vicar, or other whatsoever minister... refuse to use the said common prayers, or to minister the sacraments ... in such order and form as they be mentioned and set forth in the said book... shall be thereof lawfully convicted, according to the laws of this realm...<sup>ii</sup>*

The penalty was loss of one year's income and six months in jail. Rector Robert, like many other clerics at the time, may have resigned to save both his conscience and his purse. He was only in his mid 40's and did not die for four years, so ill health is an unlikely primary reason for leaving his post

Rector Robert's brother, John Assheton (1524-1584), took his place. Even though they were siblings, their religious paths almost certainly differed. John's likely Protestant bias was reflected in the choice of biblical names for his two eldest sons – Abel and unusually, Abdias. Abdias – also known as Abdie – was to become the most notable member of the family in the closing decade of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, an actor on the national stage at a supremely critical moment.

## Abdias Assheton's early years

Abdias Assheton (1563-1633) was born in a significant year for the Middleton Asshetons: not only did his uncle the former rector Robert die, but so also did his cousin Richard, lord of the manor, who met an early end in July at the age of only 27. Unusually, his widow stood trial and was convicted of murder and it is likely that she murdered her husband even though no contemporary document states it unequivocally.<sup>iii</sup> That the baby baptised on 1 November was named Abdias is interesting. It is a Latinised version of Obadiah, a Hebrew prophet of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, and the eponymous title of the shortest book in the Old Testament. Obadiah, an Israelite, dreamed about God's judgment on the two countries of Israel and Edom, descended respectively from the twins Jacob and Esau. In the dream God pronounces that the Edomites will suffer punishment for their arrogance even though they are from within the same family as the Israelites, God's chosen people. According to the Wikipedia entry:

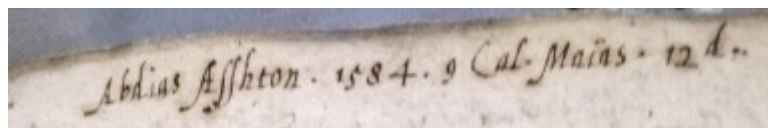
*Obadiah shows that judgment falls even within the family of God, as [Israel](#) and [Edom](#) descended from twin brothers, Jacob and Esau. According to his God, if members of the same family were to treat each other in the same manner as [Edom](#) treated the Israelites, they too may be subject to the wrath of God.*<sup>iv</sup>

The Asshetons at this time may have been riven by such rivalries, with close relatives occupying polar opposites concerning Christian practice, as Catholic and Puritan. Puritans regarded themselves as God's people and probably cast the Catholics as the Edomites, God's enemy, on whom judgement falls. The choice of the child's name – an unusual one even for the time – may mark the beginning of that thread of radical Protestant belief in the Assheton family that continued with the great revolutionary Puritan General Ralph Assheton, born over thirty years later.

Abdias must have attended Middleton Grammar School, although there is no extant record. Early conformity to the state religion would have been inculcated there. He went up to St John's College, Cambridge as a teenager in 1577-8, was awarded a BA in 1581-2, an MA in 1585 and became a Fellow in 1590, aged 27.<sup>v</sup> The award of Bachelor of Divinity was followed by his ordination as minister at Peterborough the following year.<sup>vi</sup> Abdias' early career was focused on St John's College, as he remained to become Junior Dean and

towards the closing years of the century, he wrote the biography of the Calvinist theologian, Dr. William Whitaker (1548–1595), the late master of the college and a strong Puritan. The privilege of writing his life was no mean accolade so Abdias must have been selected as a highly competent scholar who bore similar beliefs to his subject. Another factor may have been that Whitaker had had Middleton connections. His uncle was [Alexander Nowell](#), a Middleton man by education, the co-founder of the Grammar School with his brother and later Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral. Nowell was a prominent Protestant forced into exile during Queen Mary's reign and it was he who had maintained Whitaker financially who in turn dedicated a Greek translation of the Book of Common Prayer to his patron. <sup>vii</sup> Whitaker was a 'champion of the teaching of the Protestant and Reformed Church of England' <sup>viii</sup> and a fierce anti-Catholic who wrote a thesis whose title translates as '*The Roman Pope is that Antichrist which the Scriptures Foretold*'. He believed in the primacy of the Bible, spent his life interpreting it and under his leadership the college increased its numbers and gained a reputation as a Puritan stronghold. As a follower of Whitaker, Abdias' bias would without doubt have been towards Calvinism and Puritanism.

An interesting memorial of Abdias' early days as a Cambridge scholar is his commonplace book, which he labelled *Sacra Scientia* or 'sacred knowledge', held at Chetham's Library in Manchester. Begun in May 1584 when he was 21, the notebook is largely in Assheton's own hand and written almost wholly in English with some Greek and Latin notes in the margins. Over 200 pages long and with an alphabetical index at the front, the subject matter is entirely biblical and may be a personal promptbook for creating sermons.

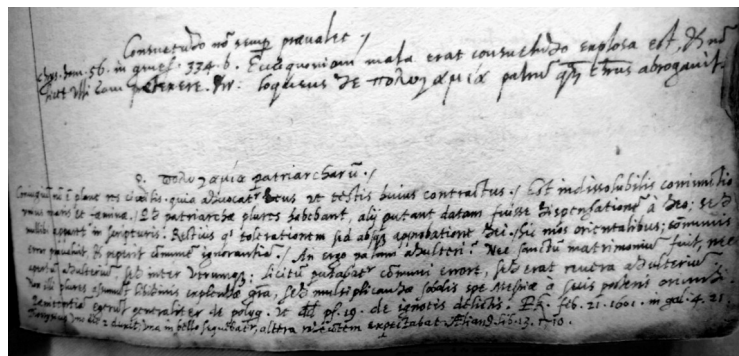


*Abdias' signature in his commonplace book and the commencement date.*

*Image by permission of Chetham's Library, Manchester*

Beside the 1584 date at the beginning, there is only one other date in the entire handwritten book and it is an interesting one, 21 February 1601 (modern 1602). This was a year almost to the day when Assheton's faith and bravery underwent the greatest test

during one of the strangest incidents in Elizabeth I's long reign: the rebellion, trial and death of the Earl of Essex. ix



Greek headed Latin footnote bearing the date 21 February 1601 (1602)

Image by permission of Chetham's Library, Manchester

## The Earl of Essex's rebellion

The dramatic events that occurred in London in February 1601 (then dated 1600) concerned Assheton closely. The most outstanding fact of his life is that, at some point in the 1590's, he became chaplain to Robert Devereux, 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Essex (1565-1601), the politician and soldier who dominated the court and the country in the final decade of Elizabeth I's reign. Famous for his intimacy with the queen, Devereux is remembered popularly as a sort of 'toy boy' to the ancient monarch rather than the military and political leader he actually aspired to be and the deeply religious man he became under Assheton's tutelage.



*Robert Devereux, 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Essex (c. 1565-1601): Nicholas Hilliard.*

*Image by permission of the National Portrait Gallery*

Elizabeth had had many favourites during her reign, but the chief of them was a girlhood friend, the Earl of Leicester. On his death in 1588, the queen had been on the throne for thirty years so she was in her mid 50's when she took Leicester's 23-year-old stepson, the Earl of Essex, as her new close companion. Tall, confident and tempestuous, his ambition grew to know few bounds. He became a Privy Councillor in 1593 and led a successful expedition to attack the Spanish port city of Cadiz, returning to England a hero in 1596.



However, he did not have the steadiness required of a member of the queen's inner advisory circle, and she twice promoted the son of her long time her advisor Lord Burghley, Robert Cecil, instead of Essex. A bitter sense of entitlement denied grew in Essex, especially against Cecil who had been a boyhood companion although presumably one whom Essex 'toughed up' being tall and active and Cecil physically disabled. Instead of political promotion, Essex received a lucrative monopoly on sweet wine imports that brought him a huge income.

In 1599, though, his star began to fade. Created Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, he went there to defeat a rebellion, but instead made peace with the rebel Earl of Tyrone on his own volition and against Elizabeth's orders. He then deserted his post, and, leaving Ireland for England, rode to Greenwich, where he burst in upon the queen when she was still only partly dressed. He was banned from court, stripped of his offices and put under house arrest in summer 1600. When the queen failed to renew his wine monopoly in November, he was financially ruined. Rashly, he saw his only option as rebellion, and supported by the young Earl of Southampton and others, he planned a coup on the streets of London early the following year.

On 3 February 1601, five of the conspiracy leaders met at Drury House, the lodging of the Earl of Southampton. Hoping to avoid suspicion, Essex himself stayed away. The group discussed his proposals for seizing the court, the tower and the city, using Essex's fellow men-at-arms from his military service as the core of the revolt. Their goal was to force the Queen to change her leading advisors. The following Saturday they even had the Globe players act Shakespeare's 'Richard II' where the king is deposed by his cousin – it cost the rebels forty shillings - as a spur to the audience and a means of justifying through theatre their treasonous ambitions. Southampton was Shakespeare's friend and patron, but how far the writer was privy to the plot is unknown.

On Sunday morning 8 February, when Lord Keeper Thomas Egerton and three others came to Essex House in the name of the Queen to probe rumours of rebellion, Essex had the four messengers seized and kept hostage while he and about two hundred followers made their way to the city. Meanwhile, Robert Cecil sent a warning to the mayor and the heralds

denouncing Essex as a traitor, and once that word was used, many followers disappeared, and none of the citizens joined him as he had expected.

Essex's position was desperate, and he decided to return home only to find the hostages gone. By that evening, after burning incriminating evidence, Essex surrendered alongside the Earl of Southampton and the other remaining followers. In the 1630's, the historian, William Camden, described the scene thus:

*the Earle finding all his hopes come to a despaire, determined to issue forth vpon them; which the Lord Sands somewhat ancientser then the rest, vrged also exceedingly, saying still, that the most valiant Councils are the most safe; that it is farre more honourable to die fighting with Noble men, then by the hand of a hangman. But Essex his minde being as vnconstant as his fortune, began rather to thinke of yeelding; and gaue notice, that vpon certaine Articles and conditions he would yeeld. <sup>x</sup>*

There were three conditions, and a key one concerned Abdias Assheton. The rebels were to be treated civilly, and should stand a fair trial. Finally:

*... That during the time of his imprisonment, hee might haue Ashton his Chaplaine with him, for his soules better comfort; The Admirall promised that he would intercede with the Queene for these things. <sup>xi</sup>*

How Essex had come to know Assheton and employ him is unknown, but at this most crucial moment of his life, his 'agony in the garden', the earl chose to have this Puritan cleric beside him. Certainly there had been resident preachers active at Essex House for some time before the rebellion and it must be assumed that Assheton was one of them. Essex's desire to prepare himself well for his trial and death was not whimsical: he had a deep Protestant faith and as a younger man had helped prepare a fighting companion, Sir Roger Williams, to face death through prayer and penitence. In a prefiguring of his own death, Essex had ensured that Williams

*...died well and very repentant, for Essex succeeded, when all others failed, in making him take a feeling of his end and prepare his soul for its journey. <sup>xii</sup>*

The authorities were in no rush to grant favours and, a week later, Essex was still requesting the presence of his chaplain. In a letter to the Constable of the Tower of Monday 16 February recorded as part of the Privy Council papers

*...the Erle of Essex desired to have a chaplain of his own sent unto him to gyve spirytuall comfort...but his own chaplain beinge evell at ease...the Deane of Norwiche, is sent unto him...<sup>xiii</sup>*

What must Abdias Assheton have been feeling at this frightening time? 'Evell at ease' is more redolent of fear than illness, and whether physical or psychological, leads to the suspicion that Assheton was one of many 'followers' who, a week after the arrest of Essex, was lying low. Given that Cecil and his inner circle needed to know the extent of the conspiracy, it is arguable that they were in conversation with Assheton already and that his illness was strategic. The Dean of Norwich, Dr. Thomas Dove, seems to have persuaded Essex that challenging the state was wrong in principle so 'that the earl in a kind relenting and falling from defences, desired earnestly confession with his own minister Ashton'.<sup>xiv</sup> This third request for Assheton was still not granted.

The trial lasted only one day, Thursday 19 February. Essex and fellow accused, the Earl of Southampton, had no defence counsel and the guilty verdict of fellow peers was a foregone conclusion. When they entered court, they kissed hands and embraced in the dock and indeed Essex's manner at his trial was almost light hearted, something he came to regret later. During the trial, the most dramatic moment was when Essex accused the absent Robert Cecil of telling him that the Spanish Infanta should succeed Elizabeth on her death, at which point Cecil appeared from behind a curtain (an arras?) and responded with extreme passion.

*Coming forth from behind the hanging where he has stood, he fell on his knees and humbly besought the Lord High Steward that he might be suffered to...clear himself of this slander<sup>xv</sup>*

Cecil had been present the whole time. Such an open and disturbing challenge must have rankled, especially as cocksure Essex had slighted the crippled Secretary with other cutting words during the trial.

When the death sentence was passed, Essex refused to beg the queen for mercy as Southampton did, preferring to die. The real test for the man was how he faced his death as a Christian, and to this end, he asked yet again for the ministrations of Abdias Assheton. Essex had now asked not once, but four recorded times for Assheton so it is beyond doubt that he personally desired to see the man. Dr. Dove was sent back again the following day,

Friday 20 February, but the earl still insisted on Assheton. He had compared himself to a sick man needing his own doctor.

## Essex's last days

The minister's visit when it finally took place the same day seemed to have a powerful effect on Essex and led to a full confession in which he implicated a large number of followers, some of whom were later put to death. As a result, some contemporaries and later historians have nursed the suspicion that Assheton was suborned by Cecil. Robert Lacey, the modern historian of the current 'royals', who wrote a lively biography of Essex in 1970, was in no doubt:

*Essex was taken in completely and to the po-faced Puritan he confessed all... with Essex's agreement, the priest went hot foot to repeat all he had heard to the Privy Council who had, with hints of both punishment and promotion, previously suborned him.* <sup>xvi</sup>

Lacey cites no evidence to support his statement, but assumes that, as Essex had failed to reveal his accomplices at the trial and had burned all his papers, the Privy Council had to find a way to get him to talk. Cecil himself remarked approvingly of the chaplain's approach to Essex and that

*Ashton, like a godly and very learned man, and one deserving much for his service, dealt so roundly and feelingly with him, as that he made the earl know that there was no salvation for him to hope for, if he dealt not clearly with his own conscience in the confession of his sins and high offences...* <sup>xvii</sup>

'One deserving much for his service': praise for Assheton indeed, but it came from the man whose main aim was to gather evidence against the conspirators and was still smarting from Essex's counter accusation at his trial. Cecil continued:

*His (Assheton's) words so pierced and moved, as that to this man he disclosed the very secrets of his heart...revealing the secrets concerning the state, and discoursing of the mischief intended.* <sup>xviii</sup>

In the 1630's Elizabeth's annalist Camden accepted Assheton's power to instil genuine fear:

*Essex...whether through the pricking of his owne conscience, or terror stricken into him by the Minister, was so afflicted in minde that he was assuredly perswaded that he should goe to hell if he concealed any whit of the truth...* <sup>xix</sup>

James Spedding, Sir Francis Bacon's Victorian biographer, is more cautious and even handed when assessing Assheton's role in Essex's betrayal of his friends. He suspected that he had

already planned to 'shop' them. Spedding recalls Essex's parting complaint as he left court after his trial that even though his leading co-conspirators had confessed, he was the only one condemned to death. Essex had gone on to say that it was they who had incited him, not the reverse and

*that before his death he would make something known that should be acceptable to her Majesty in point of state*<sup>xx</sup>

In effect, he had planned to get even and take everyone down with him. Recounting how it came about that Assheton was blamed for Essex's betrayal, Spedding refers to 'an unsigned letter first printed in Thomas Hearne's edition of Camden's *Annales* (London, 1717)'<sup>xxi</sup> sent to Anthony Bacon, Francis Bacon's brother. It is presumed to be written by someone with access to Assheton, recounting his version of events.<sup>xxii</sup> As it was written three months after the trial, Spedding notes that the letter may not be reliable as it is a second or third hand account and in it

*The story told in this letter, which is very full and circumstantial, professes to be the same which Ashton himself told to 'a worthy person' (not named) from whom, through how many mouths we are not informed, it came to the writer.*<sup>xxiii</sup>

In the letter, Essex is described as explaining his desire to see Assheton and no other because

*If a man in sickness would not willingly commit his body to an unknown physician, he hoped it would not be thought an unreasonable request for him at that time to have a preacher which had been acquainted with his conscience, to whom he might more boldly open his heart*<sup>xxiv</sup>

Spedding noted that the letter has been used by other historians 'to show that Essex was a weakling at the mercy of Ashton (sic), "a man base, fearfull and mercenary" who had been hired by the Council to force a confession by playing on Essex's well known religious feelings.' He clearly thought this was unfair to Assheton.

One more recent historian argues even more strongly that the Essex-Assheton relationship was a genuine one, fully founded in shared religion and that there was no subornment. In *Essex and the Art of Dying*, written in 1950, Beach Langston explains the process that a Puritan minister would have gone through when working with a soul on the brink of death and specifically how Assheton seems to have proceeded.<sup>xxv</sup> Essex had not admitted to the

trial what his intentions had been, but had prevaricated. Assheton would have asked: Was that good enough for a man facing death and his God?

The letter recounted that on arriving, Assheton found Essex 'exceedingly cheerful and prepared with great contentation for his End', but Assheton had to change this dangerous attitude. Essex's eternal life was at stake and Assheton's job was to prepare him for it. <sup>xxvi</sup> He pointed out to Essex that his followers included both atheists and papists and that patriotic Englishmen would hold this against him as treasonous. Essex was taken aback. He had not expected an attack on his motives. Langston recounts how he denied any treason:

*(Essex) reaffirmed his complete faith in the true religion 'professed and maintained in England'. He went on: 'For the Crown, I never affected it, neither, I praise God, was I ever so careless of my soul as by seeking a Crown on Earth' <sup>xxvii</sup>*

Assheton, the letter claims, was not impressed and it gives him these words:

*You must remember you are going out of the World, you know what it is to receive a Sentence of Death here, but you know not what it is to stand before God's Judgment seat, and to receive the Sentence of Eternal Condemnation. Leave therefore all Glorious Pretences, free your Conscience from the burden of your grievous Sinnes. <sup>xxviii</sup>*

Essex answered 'with infinite grief' that he had expected comfort from 'a Minister and Preacher of the Gospel and the Messenger of God to me at this my last End'. Assheton would not give up: he was determined to have Essex understand and confess that his intentions were treasonous and that treason was not just a crime, but a sin before God. Assheton sought to justify his approach further: giving a full and truthful account of his intentions would remove any doubt amongst people who were the earl's innocent supporters. According to the account in the anonymous letter, Assheton told Essex:

*...the publishing of them [statements of confession] may give satisfaction to many that hold the same Opinion of your Courses, which I did. <sup>xxix</sup>*

In the phrase 'which I did', Assheton is clearly reported as exonerating himself in the earl's presence. He was a member of Essex's entourage, but innocent of treason. He went on:

*And further it may be dangerous in her Majestyes person in some practise hereafter by them or some of their Instruments, the burden whereof your Soul must bear if you can and do not prevent it. <sup>xxx</sup>*

If Essex didn't implicate others in his treason, they might escape to attack the queen another day. As it turned out, Assheton was right: only four years later a group of Essex's Catholic followers launched the Gunpowder Plot, targeting the entire system of government, King and Parliament.

Camden has the same story in his *Annales*:

*Essex...whether through pricking of his owne conscience, or terror stricken in him by the Minister, was so afflicted in minde that he was assuredly perswaded that he should goe to hell if he concealed any whit of the truth, and did not discover those that were accessaries.... And he thought it not sufficient to discover these by words, but also through the ministers terrifying and lancing of his conscience, which threatened him with direfull things, he delivered that in writing under his owne hand...<sup>xxxix</sup>*

The extent of the conspiracy came out 'after long, severe, and solemn expostulation' from Assheton when Essex admitted that

*his real end was to get the Act of Succession settled by Act of Parliament upon the King of Scotland 'and named sundry worthy persons both of religion, honour and state that had given their consents and were engaged with him therein'. ...at Ashton's instance, who threatened otherwise to reveal it himself, he made a formal confession.<sup>xxxix</sup>*

This was not a Catholic confessional so secrecy was not guaranteed - the minister reported not directly to God, but to the queen as head of the English church. Essex prepared to confess and called the senior Privy Councillors who had been in charge of his trial - Secretary of State Robert Cecil and Lord High Admiral the Earl of Nottingham - to his chamber the next day. He now clearly equated the sin against the state with sin against God. In a letter Nottingham sent to a colleague at the time, he reports that Essex acknowledged Assheton's role:

*I am most bound to Her Majesty that it hath pleased her to let me have this little man, Mr. Ashton, my minister, with me for my soul; for [said he] this man in a few hours hath made me know my sins unto her Majesty, and to my God.<sup>xxxix</sup>*

The 'little man' may or may not have been the cause of a handwritten four-page confession, which has not survived; Cecil had notes taken so the key points are known. Essex admitted the plan to seize the queen as a hostage, to gain control of the Tower of London and to raise the citizens of London against the government. Lord Nottingham was surprised at how fast



the confession flowed, how many accomplices he named and how Essex even implicated his sister. Nottingham wrote at the time that Essex revealed the traits of ‘weakness and unnaturalness’. When another pair of divines, Drs. Montford and Barlow came to see Essex probably on 22 or 23 February, they too were disturbed by the extreme change in the man, from arrogance to almost grovelling penitence. When Dr. Montford expressed his surprise

*[...Essex replied] I am become another man, the cause thereof he ascribed to the worke of Gods spirit within him, and the means to his chaplain Maister Ashton who was there present with us, for he...hath plowed up my heart,...hath brought me down and humbled me<sup>xxxiv</sup>*

By 24 February, word was leaking out about Essex’s change of demeanour and how he was naming names, including the previously unsuspected, ‘divers not yet called in question’. In yet another of the letters that make up the account of the events, one John Chamberlain wrote to Sir Dudley Carleton that day:

*But I hear he begins to relent...and which is more, to lay open the whole plot and to appeach divers not called into question. His execution was expected on Saturday, then yesterday, now to-morrow, or in Thursday. Most of the Council have been with him these three or four days together.<sup>xxxv</sup>*

The continued presence of the key Privy Councillors explains the confusion surrounding the delay in naming the day of execution: they were wringing the details out of Essex. Papers in the state archive hold proof that these gentlemen were in touch with Assheton. On 24 February, they sent this message to the Constable of the Tower:

*We pray you...let Mr. Warberton require Mr. Ashton, privately of himself, to persuade him to few words and patience, and that he do accompany him.<sup>xxxvi</sup>*

Assheton was being given direct orders here: to use his power over Essex to keep the speech brief and to be on the scaffold with him, presumably to make doubly sure. Despite Spedding and Langston exonerating him, is this proof that Assheton colluded?



*Contemporary woodcut of Essex's beheading: is that Abdias to the left, giving a blessing?*

The three divines, Montford, Barlow and Assheton, spent much time with Essex in his last hours. Their role was to manage the earl's behaviour on the scaffold where he was only to

*...contain his speech within these limits; viz., the confession of his great treason and his sin towards God, his hearty repentance and earnest and incessant prayers toward God for pardon.* <sup>xxxvii</sup>

It seems that Montford and Barlow also tried hard to raise Essex's spirits, 'plowed up' as they were by Assheton's severity, and assure him of God's great mercy even to the worst sinner. At the execution, Essex's demeanour was 'firm, modest, and constant'. He had been allowed a discreet execution, with an audience of selected peers and gentlemen in the Tower courtyard, rather than facing a rabble of thousands outside the ancient prison. He mounted the scaffold on the morning of 25 February 1601, accompanied by the three divines. He conformed to the script:

*In presence of these men he gave thanks to Almighty God from the bottom of his heart, that his designs, which were so dangerous to the State proceeded not...* <sup>xxxviii</sup>

On the scaffold, Essex showed great fortitude. One of the chaplains – Assheton? – whispered to him not to be afraid and Essex replied that he had faced death many times as

a soldier and had known fear, but asked God to sustain him. Again, the contemporary account has a chaplain saying the Lord's Prayer and Essex repeating it after him while the many dozens of spectators joined in, some weeping. The final words Essex heard before the three axe blows fell must surely have been Assheton's.

There must have been genuine mutual affection as Essex gave his chaplain a precious keepsake on the day of the execution, his pocket watch. The watch is a beautiful object, its case of intricately wrought gold, surviving still in the British Museum.



*The Essex pocket watch, now in the British Museum*

## The aftermath

Propaganda management started immediately. The afternoon of the execution, the Privy Council called Assheton in and told him to countersign a 'certificate' with a summary of Essex's confession on the scaffold. Montford and Barlow had already signed.

Yet one more contemporary document about Assheton's role survives, but in this case, the man himself wrote it and signed it. In 'Doctor Asheton his owne letter concerning my Lorde of Essex',<sup>xxxix</sup> that is held at the Folger Library in Washington DC, Assheton wrote a fifteen hundred word document, a convoluted and poorly expressed statement, which was later copied into a letterbook some time before 1615. It is almost certainly Assheton's own version of the contents of the certificate he had signed with his comments and self-justification. A forgery or a piece of propaganda would not be so clumsily crafted. He wrote this statement because he was clearly under suspicion by Essex supporters and others:

*Because some are offended of mee, and mistake the Articles whereunto I put my hand at the counsel table, being required so to do by the Lordes of her Majesties privie counsel, I will briefly & truly imparte the persuading...<sup>xl</sup>*

He went on that 'Being sent from my Lord Constable of the Tower to the counsel sytting at whitehall the afternoon of the day my Lord dyed After divers questions propounded and answered', and claims he was compelled to countersign Essex's confession under the signatures of Barlow and Montford. The Council attempted to draw him further into the post-execution propaganda. On Sunday March 1, Dr. Barlow was to preach a sermon on Essex's rebellion at St Paul's cross, a location the government often used to promote its case via Anglican clergymen, and they asked Assheton to follow with a sermon there the next Sunday. In his account, he refused to preach but agreed to sign, claiming that he would only go so far in helping the Privy Council in their aims:

*it was required of me two severall tymes to preach at Paules the Sunday following the sermon that Dr Barlow preached. Whereupon... upon my knees I humblie besought their Lordships to pardon mee. At the later tyme, one of them said to mee, You shall speake nothing but truth, take, use this paper: giving me... the booke it called my Lords confession, written & subscribed by the two Drs hands. To them*

*when I had read it I spake to this effect, my Lord the substance of this is true. What, said hee, will you give your hand to this: yea said I, if you do require it...*

Assheton does not make reference to his harrying of Essex's soul described in anonymous letter. He instead goes through the five 'articles' to which he had subscribed and that formed the core of Essex's confession. Article 1 opens with the earl's change of heart:

*The late earle of Essex thanked god most hartely, that he had given hym a deeper insight into his offence, being sorie he had stood so on this justification at his arraignment for he was since it become another man.<sup>xli</sup>*

Essex's intentions had been good – merely to remove 'bad instruments' from the queen's presence – but that had been wrong. In Article 2, Assheton explained that Essex had

*...thanked god that his cause was so prevented, for if his project had taken effecte, God knows (saith he) what harme it had wrought in the Realme<sup>xlii</sup>*

It was God's will that he had been thwarted, possibly a more satisfying excuse when in reality the rebellion was a hopelessly bungled attempt. Article 3, Essex's thanks to the queen for allowing him a semi-private execution, seems surprisingly close to Assheton's heart:

*If any thinke I have testified that my Lord made a request to dye privately he is deceived & dothe me wronge. I disclayme it utterly, and hope in god I shall never say it<sup>xliii</sup>*

It must have been rumoured that Assheton had claimed that Essex negotiated a more lenient end. He insisted that Essex had not begged for his death to be private, but rather when hearing the decision 'in christian humilitie & obedience to the will of god and his ordinances on earth hee approved it'. Assheton does add an interesting comment here, confirming the popular account that has been part of the 'Elizabeth and Essex' folklore, that he believed he would be spared at the last minute by the queen:

*Onlie this I perceived that his Lordship made an accompt of his lyfe a longer tyme than it fell out to bee: and as it seemed to me ones or twice, was not altogether without hope of endinge his days in a naturall death; which thing I professe I unfaynedly desired of almightie god it might have pleased his goodness by her majestie to have granted<sup>xliv</sup>*

Even if Essex hoped that his death would be postponed, he came to accept 'that all things fall out to gods children for the best'.<sup>xlv</sup>

Assheton comes across in his letter as a more uncertain man than the lion of judgment described by Cecil. In his nervous account, however, affection for Essex is strong and he is fearful of impugning Essex's honour or

*any laying the least wrongfull imputation upon my good Lord, unto whom I will ever accompt my self most bounden, for his Lordships honourable affection towards me*<sup>xlvi</sup>

Despite Essex's confidence in him, Assheton's own reputation seems to have immediately suffered. 20<sup>th</sup> century historian Fritz Levy in an essay 'The Theatre and the Country in the 1590's' noted that

*... most contemporaries approved of what Ashton had done but, surprisingly, a few did not...some were simply puzzled... Ashton himself had the bitter experience of being turned away from the house of a friend who believed the uncharitable and false suspicions partly of folly and partly of malice creeping abroad.*<sup>xlvii</sup>

Beach Langston maintained that Assheton had simply done his work as a spiritual pastor and that he got the blame for Essex's own weakness:

*Even Harrison [Essex biographer, 1937] perhaps misled by the commonly repeated slanders against Ashton...seems to have a contempt for Essex's 'religious torpor' and a suspicion of the Council's actions which I cannot accept and which I doubt that Essex's contemporaries shared very widely.*<sup>xlviii</sup>

The jury of history must remain out on the case of Rev Assheton's character.

## A quieter life

Abdias's whereabouts immediately after the trial and death of Essex are unknown. In 1606 he re-emerged as rector in Halesworth, Suffolk, a place where the Asshetons had some links. In 1615 he took on the rectorship of a northern parish, Slaidburn, in the Ribble valley while retaining the Suffolk post. His close neighbour there was Nicholas Assheton of the Downham branch of the family although the rectorship was not in his direct gift. This distant cousin kept a diary from 1617 to 1619 and the Rev Abdias appears a few times. Commentators such as the Victorian Canon Raines have been surprised to find a rather jolly figure and not the man of fire and brimstone who supposedly so terrorised the late earl. Abdias is mentioned frequently in the diary, sometimes sermonising and often hunting and shooting, but he continued in his Puritan convictions when it came to popery, as Raines commented in his footnotes to the Assheton diary. A parishioner was given 'short shrift':

*Mrs Sherborne is ...said to be so popishly inclined, that the rector Abdias refused to be sponsor for her child.*<sup>xlix</sup>

John Dean, the Edwardian historian of Middleton, noted that Assheton was

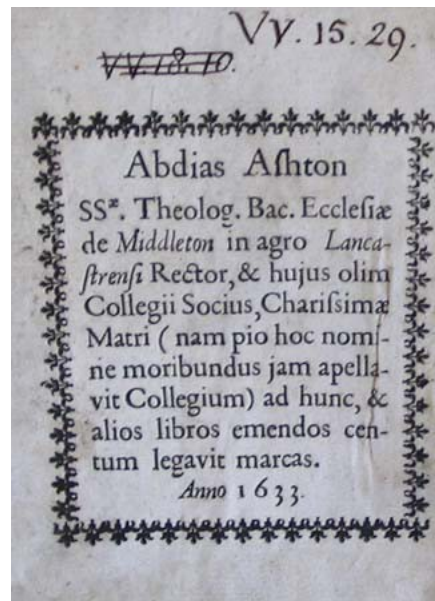
*a staunch Puritan and opposed to "perpetual ceremonies," but withal a merry sort of parson, excessively fond of field sports and athletic exercises"<sup>1</sup>*

In 1618 the death of the incumbent rector of Middleton led to Abdias returning to his home town. The lord of the manor and future general, Ralph Assheton, was still a teenager and had recently lost his grandfather (son of Richard and Elizabeth Assheton, condemned for murder) and a year later his father, aged only 40. Abdias might easily have become the boy's mentor and influenced his attitude to religion.

Abdias never married. He lived on quietly until 1633 when he died some weeks after his birthday on 8 November, aged 70 (not 75 as claimed in the church record).

*Burial: 13 Nov 1633 St Leonard, Middleton, Lancashire, England Mr Abdie Assheton, Batcheler of Divinitye and Parson of Middleton, aetatis suae 75 ano - Died: 8 Nov 1633*

His will is of great interest as he left many personal legacies to Assheton relations young and old, including gold angels (coins) to be made into memorial rings and remembered the poor of Middleton and the other parishes he served in. Abdias gave £60 to 'my dear mother' St John's College, Cambridge, to buy books of 'the fathers or new writers as they think fit'. This seems to be what happened, as the hundred or so books bearing his book label are in the main 16th-century theological works. <sup>li</sup>



*Name plate from one of the books bought with Assheton's legacy to St John's, Cambridge*

To 'my cosin and patron Raphe Asheton', now a man in his 30's, a growing power in Protestant east Lancashire and in Westminster as an MP, went the most prized possession,

*my best jewel, my watch or pocket clocke given to me by most honourable Lorde, my Lorde of Essex, the morning before his death <sup>lii</sup>*

Oddly unlike all wills made at this time, there is no commendation of his soul to God, and no overt mention of religion. It is entirely worldly, the lively will of an unknowable man. Could the obsessive biblical notebook keeper, the firebrand confessor of the great Essex, the abject spy, the hunting, shooting and fishing priest and the affectionate family man all be the same individual?

'One man in his time plays many parts', <sup>liii</sup> as an equally unknowable contemporary of Essex and Assheton once wrote.





- i John Dean, *Historical Rochdale*, (Self published: 1907) Ch. IV, p. 42
- ii *Act of Uniformity*, Public Act, 1 Elizabeth I, c. 2, 1559, Parliamentary Archives
- iii Whether there was any stress between the couple over religious observance cannot be known although Elizabeth Assheton did escape the death penalty for an unrecorded reason.
- iv Wikipedia, *Book of Obadiah*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book\\_of\\_Obadiah](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_of_Obadiah)
- v Four scholars' places were funded by a Hugh Ashton (d. 1522) from one of the Lancashire Ashton families. Wikipedia [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hugh\\_Ashton](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hugh_Ashton)
- vi *ACAD A Cambridge Alumni Database*, University of Cambridge, <http://venn.lib.cam.ac.uk/acad/enter.html>
- vii Wikipedia, *William Whitaker*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William\\_Whitaker\\_\(theologian\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Whitaker_(theologian))
- viii Ibid. Wikipedia, *William Whitaker*,
- ix Abdias Assheton, *Commonplace Book*, MS. dated 1584 onwards Chetham's Library, Manchester, p. 123. The content of the Latin note appears to be about the biblical attitude to polygamy so is not relevant to the Essex events of the previous year.
- x William Camden, *Annales, or, The History of the Most Renowned and Victorious Princesse Elizabeth Late Queen of England. Contayning all the Important and Remarkable Passages of State, both at Home and Abroad during her Long and Prosperous Reigne*, THE FOVRE and Fortieth Yeere OF HER REIGNE, pp. 309-10. Early English Books online Text Creation Partnership. <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebogroup/>
- xi Ibid. Camden *Annales*
- xii G B Harrison, *The Life and Death of Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex* (London: Cassell and Co.: 1937), p. 91
- xiii *Acts of the Privy Council, 1600-1601*, <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/acts-privy-council/vol31/pp151-175>
- xiv Ibid. Harrison
- XV James Spedding, *The letters and the Life of Francis Bacon*, 2 Vols., (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1861-1862), Vol II, Ch.IX, p. 224
- xvi Robert Lacey, *Robert Earl of Essex, an Elizabethan Icarus* (London: Phoenix Press, 1971), pp. 312-3
- xvii Beach Langston, *Essex and the Art of Dying*, *Huntington Library Quarterly*, Vol. 13. No 2 (Feb. 1950) (University of Pennsylvania Press: 1950), p. 122. Cecil spoke these words at the subsequent trial of Sir Christopher Blount.
- xviii Ibid. p. 122
- xix Camden *Annales*, pp. 309-10
- xx Spedding, *Bacon*, Ch. X, p. 233
- xxi Ibid. p. 234
- xxii Brother of Francis Bacon. Both men were former close allies of Essex.
- xxiii Spedding, *Bacon*, Ch. X, p. 234
- xxiv Ibid. p. 234
- xxv *Essex and the Art of Dying*, p. 122
- xxvi
- xxvii Ibid. p. 124

xxviii Ibid. p. 124

xxix Spedding, *Bacon*, Ch. X, p. 234

xxx *Essex and the Art of Dying*, p. 124

xxxi Camden, *Annales*, pp. 309-10

xxxii Spedding, *Bacon*, Ch. X, p. 232

xxxiii Spedding, *Bacon*, Ch. X, pp. 236-7

xxxiv *Essex and the Art of Dying* p. 126, quoting Birch or Barlow

xxxv Spedding, *Bacon*, Ch. X, p. 232

xxxvi Ed. Mary Ann Everett Green, *Calendar of State Papers (Domestic), 1598-1601*, Vol 5, (London : Longman, Brown, Green, etc., 1856-72), p. 592

xxxvii *Essex and the Art of Dying*, p. 124

xxxviii Ed. Thomas Bayly Howell, *State trials: A Complete Collection of State Trials and Proceedings for High Treason and Other Crimes and Misdemeanors from the Earliest Period to the Year 1783, Volume 1.* (London: T.C. Hansard for Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1816). p. 1358

xxxix *Doctor Asheton his owne letter concerning my Lorde of Essex.* A five page unaddressed letter in three images held at Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington DC, USA, 68586-8, dated no later than 1615. My transcription of the MS.

xl Ibid. Folger 68586

xli Ibid.

xlii Ibid.

xliii Folger 68587

xliv Ibid.

xlv Ibid.

xlvi Folger 68588

xlvii Fritz Levy, *The Theatre and the Country in the 1590's in The Reign of Elizabeth I: court and culture in the last decade* (xxx: publisher, 1995, p.

xlviii *Essex and the Art of Dying*, p. 129 Note

xlix Nicholas Assheton, *The journal of Nicholas Assheton, of Downham, in the county of Lancaster, esq., for part of the year 1617, and part of the year following: Interspersed with notes from the life of his contemporary, John Bruen of Bruen Stapelford, in the county of Chester, esq.* Ed. Canon F.R Raines, (Chetham society: 1848), p. 87

l John Dean, *History of Middleton*, (Manchester: 1907), Ch XVII, p 144)

li St John's College website

lii Ed. John Parsons Earwaker, *Lancashire and Cheshire Wills and Inventories, 1572 to 1696, Now Preserved at Chester:* (Chetham society: 1893), pp. 209-11.

liii William Shakespeare, *As you like it*, Act II, Scene vii.