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**MURDER, ALCHEMY, AND THE WARS OF THE ROSES**  
**BY PETER FLEMING**

What follows is a kind of murder mystery, but not a whodunit. The identity of the man who carried out the crime, while indeed a mystery, is probably unknowable and actually unimportant. There is little room for doubt as to the identity of the man who gave him the order. The real mystery lies with the identity of the victim. In attempting to solve the mystery, we shall enter the kaleidoscope of faction and violence that was high politics during the Wars of the Roses, and make the acquaintance of one of fifteenth-century England's foremost alchemists.

In March 1461 Edward earl of March, and since his father's death at the battle of Wakefield the previous December, duke of York, seized the throne from the hapless Lancastrian Henry VI, to become Edward IV, the first Yorkist king. He was helped in his efforts by Richard Neville, earl of Warwick – the 'Kingmaker' as he would much later be known – a man whose immense wealth and power was matched by his ambition and ruthlessness. By the beginning of 1469 it might have seemed as if Edward had finally buried all hope of a Lancastrian revival: the last rebel outposts had been taken, Henry VI was a prisoner, and his indomitable queen, Margaret of Anjou, was in exile. The country was held by a network of trusted lieutenants. In the Bristol region – Gloucestershire, Somerset, and south-east Wales – paramount among these were Warwick himself and William Herbert, who had been raised to the earldom of Pembroke in September of the previous year. Pembroke was the son of Sir William ap Thomas, and between them they had built Raglan Castle in Monmouthshire, probably the most magnificent of fifteenth-century castles in England and Wales.<sup>1</sup> Warwick had strong local interests through the Despenser inheritance of his wife Anne Beauchamp and his cousin, George Neville, son of Lord Abergavenny. These included extensive estates in Gloucestershire as well as the Earls court of the Honour of Gloucester, held at St James's Priory in Bristol, and an interest in the manor and hundred of the Barton, which covered a large area to the immediate east and north of the town.<sup>2</sup> As we shall see, members of Pembroke's family were active in Bristol in the 1460s.

However, a very astute and well-placed observer of events in early 1469 might have detected signs that Edward's rule was not so secure. Edward's recent marriage to Elizabeth Woodville, the widow of a Lancastrian knight, brought her numerous kin into the royal family, and many of these had to be found suitably elevated husbands and wives. This severely restricted the scope of Warwick's plans for his own family. He may have resented the influence that the Woodvilles were now enjoying, feeling that he no longer had the king's ear. He may have been offended that such relatively lowly people were now his social and political equals. However, it was probably differences over foreign policy that most enraged him: he had been pursuing a French alliance, but the Woodville marriage was swiftly followed by an alliance with the duke of Burgundy, the French king's bitter rival. Warwick felt that he had been made to look foolish on the international stage. He began plotting against the king he believed he had helped to make, and even managed to suborn Edward's own brother, George, duke of Clarence. The pair covertly encouraged rebellion in the north. In July 1469 Warwick's opposition to Edward was made brutally apparent at the battle of Edgecote, near Banbury, where his forces comprehensively defeated a largely Welsh army led by Pembroke and Humphrey Stafford, earl of Devon. This was a victory not only over Edward, but also Pembroke, who was captured. He and Warwick were

personal enemies, and had long quarrelled over the contested lordship of South Wales. Immediately after the battle Pembroke and his brother Sir Richard Herbert were executed.

In the murderous purge of the Edwardian loyalists that followed, another Herbert was killed at Bristol within a month of the battle. Together with the execution of the earl of Devon in Bridgwater in August, the massacre of the Herberts effectively removed the uppermost layer of royal authority in the West Country. The executions at Bristol and Bridgwater were almost certainly carried out by order of Warwick.

Who was the man killed at Bristol? At least ten years later he was described by the Bristol chronicler and town clerk Robert Ricart as Pembroke's brother: 'And one of the lorde Herbert his brothirn was slayne at Bristowe'<sup>3</sup> Another chronicler, John Warkworth, master of Peterhouse, Cambridge, writing between 1478 and 1483 and apparently well-informed on Edgecote and its aftermath, identified him as Thomas.<sup>4</sup> William Worcestre, the Bristol-born antiquarian, writing at around the same time, and whom one might expect to be at least as well-informed on events in the town of his birth, was unsure: in his account of the aftermath of Edgecote he deleted his first identification of *Richard* in favour of *William* Herbert.<sup>5</sup> The problem of identification – shared by contemporary chroniclers and modern historians alike – is compounded by the size of the Herbert clan: both Pembroke and his father, Sir William ap Thomas, had many legitimate sons, and there were numerous bastards.<sup>6</sup> Accepting Ricart's statement that the Herbert in question was Pembroke's brother does not help, since among the earl's brothers was William (giving the same Christian name to two brothers was not a rare practice in medieval families), Sir Richard of Colebrook, and Thomas. So, there are three contenders for the Herbert murdered in Bristol: William, Richard, and Thomas. Who were they?

A William Herbert was employed in the Bristol customs house: he was supervisor, or controller, of the scrutiny of the customs from 1462 to 1466. But this William Herbert appears to have survived the cull of his kindred: William Herbert, merchant of Bristol, was granted a licence to trade in October 1471.<sup>7</sup> Sir Richard Herbert of Colebrook had local interests: in 1464/5 he received the Gloucestershire manors of Lassington, and Netherleigh, in Westbury-on-Trym, forfeited by Sir John Scudamore; but Worcestre and Warkworth agree that he was killed at Edgecote.<sup>8</sup>

This leaves Thomas. The escheator, or royal financial official, for Gloucestershire and the Welsh March was informed of the death of Thomas Herbert esquire in October 1471: delays in issuing such notifications were not rare, and given the confusion that engulfed England between 1469 and 1471, this could have related to a Thomas Herbert slain after Edgecote. The Thomas Herbert esquire, late sheriff of Somerset and Dorset, whose widow Katherine was sued for debt in early 1472, is probably the same man whose death was notified the previous year.<sup>9</sup> If this is our victim, then he would have been well-known to those who witnessed his execution. Thomas Herbert, esquire of the body to Edward IV and sheriff of Somerset and Dorset in 1461-2, was a key figure in the royal administration of the West Country: constable of Gloucester castle and a county JP and frequent commissioner, he was also MP for Gloucester in 1467-8. He had been commissioned along with Lord Herbert, future earl of Pembroke, to take ships in Bristol for the king's fleet in March 1462, and it was from Bristol that he sailed on an embassy to Castile later that year. In 1467 he was granted the wardship and marriage of Robert, son and heir of John Poyntz of Iron Acton. According to Rudder's *New History of Gloucestershire*, Thomas Herbert was granted the manors of Dutesbourn Rouse and Longney, forfeited by Thomas and William Mull in 1462/3, and died without male heirs, the

manors being granted to Sir Richard Beauchamp in 1474/5.<sup>10</sup> A Thomas Herbert was a Bristol customs collector between 1466 and 1468, but this was probably the son or nephew (Pembroke's son) of his namesake the squire of the body.<sup>11</sup>

Thomas Herbert senior was the villain of an extraordinary tale told by Thomas Norton, a Bristol customs controller, esquire of Edward IV's household, and prominent alchemist, author of one of the most celebrated English alchemical works, *The Ordinall of Alchimy*.<sup>12</sup> According to Norton's account in the *Ordinall*, written in or after 1477, Herbert had abducted another alchemist, Thomas Dalton, from Tewkesbury Abbey and imprisoned him for four years in the hope that he would produce gold for him; eventually, Herbert decided to execute the alchemist, but Dalton's pious prayers moved him to order his release. According to Norton, Dalton had been spotted by Herbert when he was presented before Edward IV by John Delves, whose clerk he had once been. Delves was another esquire of the household, and a member of Warwick's affinity: he was proclaimed a traitor in April 1471 and lost his head after Edward's victory at Tewkesbury the following month. The identification of Delves with Warwick's man raises the possibility of a factional sub-text to this story: that Herbert's mistreatment of Dalton may have been motivated by the hapless monk's associations as well as his alchemical claims.<sup>13</sup> However, Norton also says that 'Herberde dyed so[ne] after in his bedde'.<sup>14</sup> Could Norton have confused Thomas the elder with his younger namesake? Whatever the truth behind this tale, it does indicate that Thomas Herbert was not always remembered with affection in Bristol. On balance, it seems safest to agree with Warkworth, and to identify Warwick's victim at Bristol in 1469 with Thomas, brother of William Herbert, earl of Pembroke.

Herbert's execution at Bristol was an early indication of the town's loyalties in the renewal of the Wars of the Roses that followed. A town contingent fought for Lord Berkeley, probably a Warwick supporter, at the battle of Nibley Green in March 1470, and in May of the following year Margaret of Anjou's army was supplied – and possibly reinforced – from the town on its way to fight Edward at Tewkesbury. This battle, on 4 May 1471, spelled the real end for any hopes that Henry VI and Margaret might again reign as king and queen: Clarence had changed sides once more, and his support was crucial to his royal brother's success; Warwick had already been killed at Barnet the previous month; on the night that Edward returned victorious to London after the battle of Tewkesbury, he ordered Henry VI's murder, and Margaret was left to live out the rest of her life in obscurity. Bristol had to sue for a pardon, from which the ringleaders of its pro-Warwick faction were exempted. Bristol had played a small, but significant, part in one of the most dramatic episodes in England's later medieval history.

- 1 For Pembroke's career, see H.T. Evans, *Wales and the Wars of the Roses* (1998 edn., Sutton, Stroud), *passim*.
- 2 M. Hicks, *Warwick the Kingmaker* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1998), *passim*. For Earls Court and the Barton, M. W. Ponsford, 'Bristol Castle: archaeology and the history of a royal fortress', unpublished University of Bristol M.Litt. thesis, 1979), pp 180-92. M. Sharp (ed.), *Accounts of the Constables of Bristol Castle in the Thirteenth and Early Fourteenth Centuries*, Bristol Record Society, 34 (1982), pp. xxiv, xxxvi-lxiii.
- 3 L. T. Smith (ed), *The Maire of Bristowe is Kalendar*, Camden Society (1872), p. 44.
- 4 J. O. Halliwell (ed), *A Chronicle of the First Thirteen Years of the Reign of King Edward the Fourth*, by John Warkworth, Camden Society (1839), p. 7.
- 5 J. H Harvey (ed.), *William Worcester: Itineraries* (Clarendon, Oxford, 1969), pp. 339-40.
- 6 See the family tree in H.T. Evans, *Wales and the Wars of the Roses* (1998 edn, Sutton), p. 136.

- 7 Evans, *Wales and the Wars of the Roses*, pp. 108, 162; E.W.W. Veale (ed), *The Great Red Book of Bristol*, Text pt 2, Bristol Record Society, 8 (1938), pp. 136. But R. A. Griffiths & R. S. Thomas, *The Principality of Wales in the Later Middle Ages*, I, *South Wales* (University of Wales, Cardiff, 1972), p. 186, identifies several contemporary William Herberts!
- 8 S. Rudder, *A New History of Gloucestershire* (Cirencester, 1779), pp. 517, 794; Evans, *Wales and the Wars of the Roses*, p. 108.
- 9 *C[alendar of] F[ine] R[olls]*, 1471-1485, no.4; N[atational] A[rchives] E13 11 Edward IV, Hillary Term.
- 10 pp. 424, 535; J. C. Wedgwood, *History of Parliament, 1439-1509: Biographies* (HMSO, 1938), pp. 443-4; D. Thomas, 'The Herberts of Raglan as supporters of the House of York in the second half of the fifteenth century' (unpublished University of Wales MA thesis, 1967), pp. 234-7, 239-42, 244, identifies him as Pembroke's brother; *CFR, 1461-71*, p. 190.
- 11 Thomas, 'Herberts of Raglan', pp. 250-1; NA E159 Trinity 6 EIV rot 19; Hillary 9 EIV rot 27; E13 8 EIV Easter – Middlesex ; *CFR, 1461-71*, pp. 178-80. Thomas Herbert the younger was also escheater in Gloucestershire in 1461-2 and 1468-9: *CFR, 1461-71*, pp. 49, 114, 132, 138, 222. Evans, *Wales and the Wars of the Roses*, 135.
- 12 J Reidy (ed), *Thomas Norton's Ordinal of Alchemy*, Early English Text Society, original series, 272 (1975), ll. 926-1012, pp. xxxvii-llii; The identification of the alchemist with the Bristol customer was questioned by M. Nierenstein & P F Chapman, 'Enquiry into the authorship of The Ordinal of Alchemy', *Isis*, 18 (1932), pp. 290-321, but convincingly reasserted in J Reidy, 'Thomas Norton and the *Ordinal of Alchimy*', *Ambix*, 6 (1957), pp. 59-85.
- 13 Wedgwood, *History of Parliament*, pp. 267-8.
- 14 J. Hughes, *Arthurian Myths and Alchemy: The Kingship of Edward IV* (Sutton, Stroud, 2002), pp. 199-201.

This article is adapted from P. Fleming, *Bristol and the Wars of the Roses, 1451-1471*, to be published by the Bristol Branch of the Historical Association in the Autumn.

[caption for image]:

Thomas Norton's international reputation as an alchemist survived into the 17<sup>th</sup> century: title page of Michael Maier, *Tripus Aureus ...* (1618)