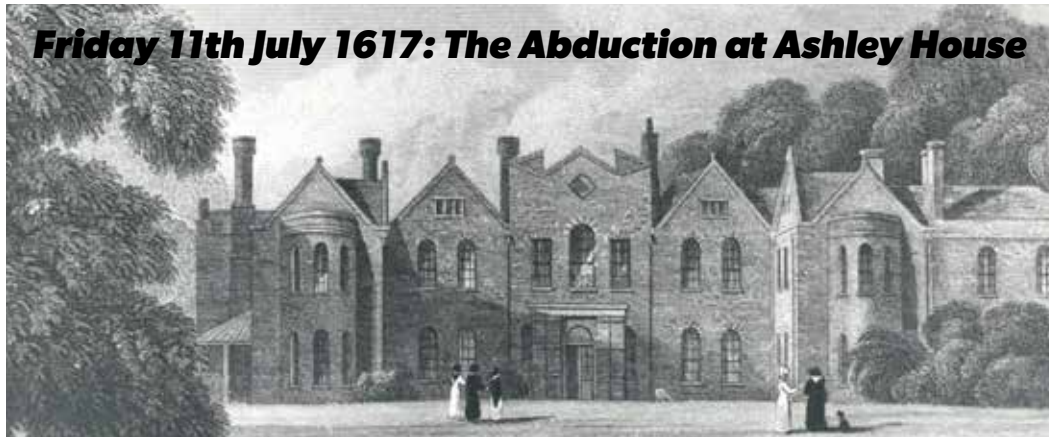


The 'Most Notorious Riot' in Oatlands 1617

A True Story Based on First-hand Accounts By C.L. Dawson

Part I : RIOT

Friday 11th July 1617: The Abduction at Ashley House



Ashley House, site of the riot in Oatlands (drawing c1800)

On a summer evening in mid-July 1617, a group of around a dozen men armed with pistols leaves London hurriedly on horseback and rides over the bridge into Surrey. Their destination is

Ashley House in Oatlands, a few miles beyond Hampton Court, and their mission is to abduct a fourteen-year-old girl who has been hidden there by her mother in order to avoid a forced marriage.

Following behind the riders in his coach is the child's father, Sir Edward Coke, until recently Lord Chief Justice of the King's Bench, the most important judge in the country. In a separate coach, because they are not on speaking terms, his wife Lady Elizabeth Hatton is also in pursuit, desperate to arrive before her husband, and shouting at the driver to go as fast as possible, insisting that she will pay any recompense should the horses collapse of exhaustion. If the threat of violence and bloodshed had not been present, this could have been a scene from a comedy at one of the London playhouses.

Coke had discovered his daughter, Frances, missing from the family home at Hatton House in Holborn that morning and, in a panic that his carefully negotiated plans with the Villiers family could be in jeopardy, had sent out his spies to find out where she had been taken. Suspecting that relatives of his wife might be involved, two of his men — Will Nobbs and Harvey — were sent to Ashley House, a large red-brick mansion set in the

middle of extensive parkland bordering Oatlands Park, which is being rented from the 7th Earl of Argyll by Sir Edmund Withipole and his wife, Frances Cornwallis, who is Lady Hatton's cousin. Having been advised not to raise suspicions, they did not announce themselves but engaged the scullery boy in conversation, claiming that they were looking for a lost spaniel that had last been seen chasing a coach. The unsuspecting boy told them he had not seen a dog, but a coach and escort had indeed arrived in the early hours of the morning with a young woman on board.

Robert and Clement, Coke's sons from his first marriage, lead the advance party sent ahead to stand guard and make sure that no-one enters or leaves the house. Some hours later they arrive at the gatehouse of Ashley House, and find the gates locked shut, with no sign of movement beyond, so they decide to wait for their father as requested. However, their stepmother arrives first, on horseback sitting behind a servant, having had to commandeer a passing packhorse. They refuse to let her pass, and when Coke's coach arrives not long afterwards, there is a scuffle as she tries to grab a pistol to confront him. Being unsuccessful, she orders her servant to draw his sword, but clearly outnumbered, he declines. So, she stands in front of the gates, and proclaims that her husband will have to spill her blood before she will give way.

Ignoring the pleas of his wife, and with no response



Frances Coke aged 21 in 1623 (National Trust Collection)

to his shouts to open the gates, Coke gives the order to break them down, causing much damage. The group then proceeds across the walled courtyard to the front of the house, which is dark and silent as if empty. The main entrance is a stone portico with columns, and a few steps leading to a solid wooden door. Coke bangs on it loudly, waving his warrant, and proclaiming in the same loud voice that he uses in court that he has the right to enter on the orders of the King himself. There is still no answer, so his sons begin hammering on the door, and trying to force it open, but it will not give. Then, one of the party discovers a window to the side of the building that, it being a warm night,

has been left slightly open and he is able to climb in and open the door from the inside.

The rowdy group rushes into the entrance hall, pistols drawn. At this point Edmund Withipole, his wife, and their servants, come out of the shadows, pleading for calm as there are twelve children in the house. An angry Edward Coke demands the return of his daughter, and upon receiving only denials, tells them in no uncertain terms that they are going to search the residence from top to bottom, and that if any of them are obstructive, the consequences might be fatal.

The men fan out, and the sound of boots reverberates up the oak staircase and along the corridors until there is a cry of anguish from upstairs and Frances Coke is found — terrified by the banging, and the loud voices, and the footsteps coming nearer — hiding in a closet. As she is presumed complicit in her own concealment, she is roughly handled by her step-brothers, dragged downstairs past her furious father and distraught mother, bundled into Sir Edward Coke's coach which, escorted by the cavalry, makes its way back through the parkland in the fading light, heading for Robert Coke's house at the edge of Kingston, in Town's End.

In Part 2, we discover the reasons behind the abduction at Ashley House in Oatlands, and Lady Hatton's dramatic reaction.

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Part 2 : REACTION



Sir Edward Coke



Lady Elizabeth Hatton

Saturday 12th July 1617: Full Tilt

The abduction of Frances Coke, aged just fourteen, from Ashley House in Oatlands was the result of her father's desperate plan which was, in essence, to sell his younger daughter to the older brother of the King's new favourite, in exchange for being restored to his previous offices. Or, as an observer put it: "He took his daughter to market." The fact that Frances Coke's parents had a tempestuous marriage only added fuel to the fire: her father was utterly devoted to the law, and possessed a temperament that even his friends would admit was arrogant, obnoxious and overbearing; whilst her mother came from an illustrious family (born Elizabeth Cecil, her grandfather was William Cecil, Lord Burghley), was a wealthy widow in her own right and fiercely protective of how her inheritance was to be bestowed.

Sir Edward Coke's career had gone from strength to strength — he had become a Privy Councillor and been appointed Lord Chief Justice of the King's Bench. However, in his passion and zeal for the common law, he had frequently opposed the King's royal prerogative which resulted, in late 1616, in his dismissal from office. For someone whose legal career meant everything, he became a desperate man in exile.

In the summer of 1617, King James I was in Scotland and had taken with him George Villiers, a twenty-four-year-old courtier who he had showered with titles in the two years since their meeting. The family of Buckingham, as Villiers was now known, also stood to benefit from the King's patronage, and he had an elder brother John, about whom

there were some rumours of health problems, and a younger brother Christopher, known as Kit. In his newly miserable state, it struck Sir Edward Coke that if he arranged a marriage between his daughter Frances and John Villiers, he might obtain Buckingham's support and therefore by association, please the King. Everyone would gain from this plan — he, Coke, would have his old job back, and John Villiers would become a prosperous man with a beautiful young bride.

The major problem was not that Coke gave no thought to the wishes of his young daughter, since that did not even cross his mind, but that he did not tell his wife until the negotiations had been finalised. Coke announced the fait accompli to Lady Hatton at Hatton House on Thursday 10th July, and she silently removed Frances to her cousin's house in Oatlands that same night.

On Saturday morning, Lady Hatton returns to London to seek help, where she stops first to pick up her friend and adviser Sir John Holles, before heading at full tilt for York House on the Strand, the home of Sir Francis Bacon. However, within sight of their destination, taking a corner too fast, their coach overturns and is dragged along by the horses, breaking into pieces. It is pure luck that she and Holles emerge unhurt, but shaken, and are able to proceed on foot. Bacon advises her to prepare a petition detailing her complaint and he will convene a meeting of the Privy Council to review it.

Sunday 13th July 1617: A Petition before the Privy Council

The eight members of the Privy Council meet at Whitehall Palace on Sunday afternoon where Francis Bacon reads out Lady Hatton's petition in which she complains "in somewhat of a passionate and tragical manner" that due to her daughter's weak constitution, she had sent her to Sir Edmund Withipole's house for the country air. Informed of the violence used to retrieve her, the Clerk of the Court is despatched to Kingston to deliver the message that Coke must bring his daughter immediately to London to seek medical help. Coke responds that he promises "upon his peril" to deliver her on Monday morning.



Villers Family from left: George, John, Kit (right) with their mother

Monday 14th July 1617: Lady Hatton’s Army

Lady Hatton has not rested during the night but instead, taking a leaf from her husband’s book, has organised her own cavalry. With the support of several of her allies, sixty men on horseback, all armed, assemble at first light on the main road outside Putney, halfway between Kingston and London. Here they stand and wait, scanning the road ahead, until it is clear that Sir Edward Coke is not coming. Whether he had been tipped off, or was simply taking precautions, Coke had left by a different route, heading over Kingston Bridge and approaching London through Middlesex.

A “notable skirmish” had been narrowly avoided because, surrounding Frances’ coach, Coke’s sons and servants “all swore they would die in the place before they would part with her.”

Tuesday 15th July 1617: A Charge of Riot and Force

On Tuesday afternoon, Coke appears at the Privy Council where he is accused of overstepping the bounds of his warrant, which was only for a search of a house, not for breaking and entering, and threatening at gun point, and abducting and imprisoning. Bacon accuses Coke of taking the law — the same law that he himself has written down in case after case for posterity — into his own hands for his own ends, and thereby has made a mockery of it, and informs him that charges will be brought in the Star Chamber.

Frances Coke, having been dragged from pillar to post, is on the move again. On the orders of the council, she is moved to a safe house, to be watched over by a representative from both warring factions.

In Part 3, news of the riot in Oatlands goes public, causing a great scandal, and King James I is forced to intervene.



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Part 3 : A ROYAL RESPONSE

Saturday 19th July 1617: The 'Paul's Walkers'

The events at Oatlands might have remained private had Lady Hatton not resolved in her distress to seek help from the Privy Council. Already, barely a week later, the story has become public and rumours and hearsay distort the facts to favour whichever side is supported: the husband and his God-given rights over his wife and children; or the wife and her quest for justice and fairness in the face of broken promises.

The first account by an outsider of the "great stirs" between Sir Edward Coke and Lady Hatton is written on Saturday 19th July by John Chamberlain. He mentions that the story is the talk of London: "It was a long story to tell all the passages of this business which hath furnished Powles (St Paul's) and this town very plentifully for a whole week."

Chamberlain, a well-connected social commentator blessed with inherited wealth, obtains much of his information about the goings on at court from his daily visits to St Paul's cathedral which had become the marketplace for news and gossip. Inside, in the aisles, he meets the regulars — the 'Paul's Walkers' — whilst outside in the churchyard he overhears conversations, and browses the stalls selling muckraking pamphlets.



St Paul's Cathedral 1600s

Sunday 20th July 1617: The King's Reply

Letters have been flying back and forth across the length of the country for several days, but in reality, all that matters is the King's perspective. At seven o'clock on Sunday morning a courier arrives at the Temple with his response. The royal views

now must be fitted into the current circumstances, without being altered in any way that might later be taken, or misrepresented, as treasonable.

In the afternoon, Coke travels to Oatlands Palace where Queen Anna and the sixteen-year-old Prince Charles are



King James I

spending the summer, to read the King's letter together. It is good news for the Coke faction: King James is of the opinion that it was the stealing of Frances Coke from her father that was the great offence, and that the violence of Coke at Ashley House was simply the effort required to redress the situation. A commission is to be set up and in the meantime she is to be restored to Coke's guardianship.

Wednesday 23rd July 1617: Warrants for Abuse

With the King's formal response, the Privy Council members are suddenly very keen to be seen to reverse their previous decisions. There is no longer talk of Coke — who is telling all who will listen of the insulting language and foul manner with which they treated him — being brought before the Star Chamber.

Warrants are issued for the arrest of those involved in the 'abuses' of removing Frances Coke from her father, including Sir Edmund Withipole, and some of his servants who are said to have defamed John Villiers by spreading gossip about his 'sore leg'. Was it gout, or an ulcer, or a tumour that might limit his life expectancy? Was an unhealthy body indication of an unhealthy mind?

Thursday 24th July 1617: Two Chambers in Kingston

Edward Coke returns with Frances to Sir Robert Coke's house in Kingston. Lady Hatton seeks

to rent suitable accommodation nearby, but is reduced to hiring two rooms a quarter of a mile away, from where she walks each day to Town's End to spend all her time with Frances, so that no-one else can influence her.

Tuesday August 12th 1617: A Change of Tactics

By the beginning of August however, as the result of the conclusions of the King's commission, Lady Hatton is imprisoned or rather, as a woman of noble birth, she is confined to a house in Leadenhall Street belonging to Sir William Craven, who had been Lord Mayor of London.

Now that the King's viewpoint is widely known, family and friends are notably less vocal in their support. So, she changes tactics and insists that there is another interested suitor, namely Henry de Vere, 18th Earl of Oxford. The main problem is that de Vere has been abroad for the past four years, spending his inheritance on an extended tour of Europe, and is therefore not easily contactable to ensure his consent; but this is a minor issue given the urgency of the situation. With the certainty that he would unhesitatingly agree to the match, Lady Hatton had set down, in a script of the type he would have used, the sort of

words and phrases expressing his interest that he was surely going to write to Frances. Lady Hatton now produces a 'pre-contract letter', apparently written by Frances on the 10th July, which states that she cannot marry John Villiers for the simple reason that she is already betrothed to someone else.

Coke is quick to act. Within days, a letter in the same handwriting, addressed to her mother, is made public. Unsurprisingly, a less than subtle hint of legal language is apparent. Frances, who is now "aware that as a mere child, and not understanding the world or what is good for myself", retracts her opposition to marrying John Villiers. She adds a postscript: "Dear Mother, believe there has no violent means been used to me by words or deeds."

This afterthought has been added to counter rumours circulating St Paul's that the notoriously violent Coke has beaten his daughter into submission by tying her to a bedpost and the use of a whip.

In Part 4, we discover how order is restored, and the aftermath of the riot in Oatlands.



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Part 4 : RESTORATION



Tuesday 2nd September 1617: Clear of all Obstructions

By early September, Lady Hatton still refuses to provide the letter from Henry de Vere, and so it is judged a forgery. The path to the marriage of Frances Coke and John Villiers is now clear of all obstructions.

Coke goes to meet the King and Buckingham on their way back from Scotland and his behaviour reverts to his pomposity of old. He is "transported by passion", and "thrusts himself upon the King with great boldness", and audaciously affirms that his daughter is most deeply in love with John Villiers.

Monday September 29th 1617: Michaelmas Wedding

The day of the wedding of Sir John Villiers and Frances Coke arrives. Nine coaches with the wedding party leave Town's End, and make their way across Kingston Bridge, through Home Park, to Hampton Court Palace. The ceremony takes place in the Chapel Royal where the Villiers family is present, as are Coke's sons and daughters from his first marriage. No-one from the Cecil family makes an appearance, and Lady Hatton sends a message that she is sick.

Sir Edward Coke, with a "merry countenance", leads his daughter halfway down the aisle, before handing her over to King James, who hands her in turn to Sir John Villiers. This act neatly encapsulates the events of the past few weeks.

Saturday 11th October 1617: Crazy in Body and Sick in Mind

Coke has been restored to the Privy Council;

but there is no indication as to if, or when, he will become Chief Justice again. Within days of regaining his place, he brings formal charges against his troublesome wife, with immediate results. Chamberlain writes that Lady Hatton "lies still at Sir William Craven's, crazy in body and sick in mind."

Lady Hatton's advisers prepare notes for her in anticipation of an appearance before the Star Chamber, at the end of which she should say: "Everything else pales into insignificance to Sir Edward Coke's most notorious riot committed at my Lord of Argyll's house, where without constable or proper warrant, associated with a dozen men armed with pistols, he took down the doors of the gatehouse, and of the house itself, and tore the daughter in that barbarous manner from her mother. For if it is lawful for him, who had been the Chief Justice of the law, to enter any man's house so outrageously with a dozen men, then it is lawful for any man with 100, nay with 500, to do the same; which may encourage all rebellious malefactors, and endanger the safety of the King's person, and the peace of the kingdom."

Friday 31st October 1617: In One Door, Out Another

Upon further reflection, in her 'prison', with the wedding she had so fervently opposed now having taken place, Lady Hatton recognises that her only hope of freedom is to formally settle her inherited property on her daughter and Sir John Villiers.

It is as if King James has been waiting for just this change of heart, since immediately he sends Buckingham to personally fetch her in a fleet of

coaches from Sir William Craven's house. Her return to grace is confirmed a few days later when she hosts a dinner party at Hatton House, where the King and Queen are guests of honour. Sir Edward Coke is pointedly not invited and she is heard to say of her husband that "if he came in one door, I would go out at another."

Aftermath

The Married Life of Frances Coke and John Villiers

Unsurprisingly, the marriage was not a success. There was no further mention of his sore leg, but John Villiers' air of melancholy turned into long bouts of depression and acts of self-harm. Frances did not stand by his side, but instead took a lover with whom she had an illegitimate child, causing yet another scandal, and resulting in a warrant for her arrest on adultery charges. She fled into exile, spending several years in Paris where she converted to Roman Catholicism.

Sir Edward Coke and Lady Hatton

They continued to live separate lives and were never reconciled. Despite not being restored to his legal office, Coke had a long career in parliament, in which he continued to tirelessly defend the common law against the royal prerogative and to

write his legal legacy: The Institutes of the Laws of England.

Ashley House

Built between 1602 and 1605, Ashley House was owned in 1617 by Archibald Campbell, 7th Earl of Argyll, who had purchased it to be near to Queen Anna of Denmark at Oatlands Palace. He left the country soon after and converted to Catholicism abroad, assigning his properties to his son and heir. In 1626, the original royal lease expired and the house and park reverted to the crown. In 1628, Buckingham was assassinated and King Charles I, keen to take care of the remaining members of his family, appointed his younger brother Kit Villiers as Lord Lieutenant of Hampton Court Chase, and he was granted Ashley House as his main residence. Various described as unattractive, unintelligent and a drunk, Kit Villiers died two years later. Over the next three hundred years, Ashley Park House (as it became known) had many wealthy owners until the house and its 170 acres of parkland were put up for sale in 1923. Whilst the land was sold for development, no-one wanted the 'Tudor House', and it remained empty until 1925 when parts of the interior were sold to a private buyer, and the rest of the building was demolished.



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