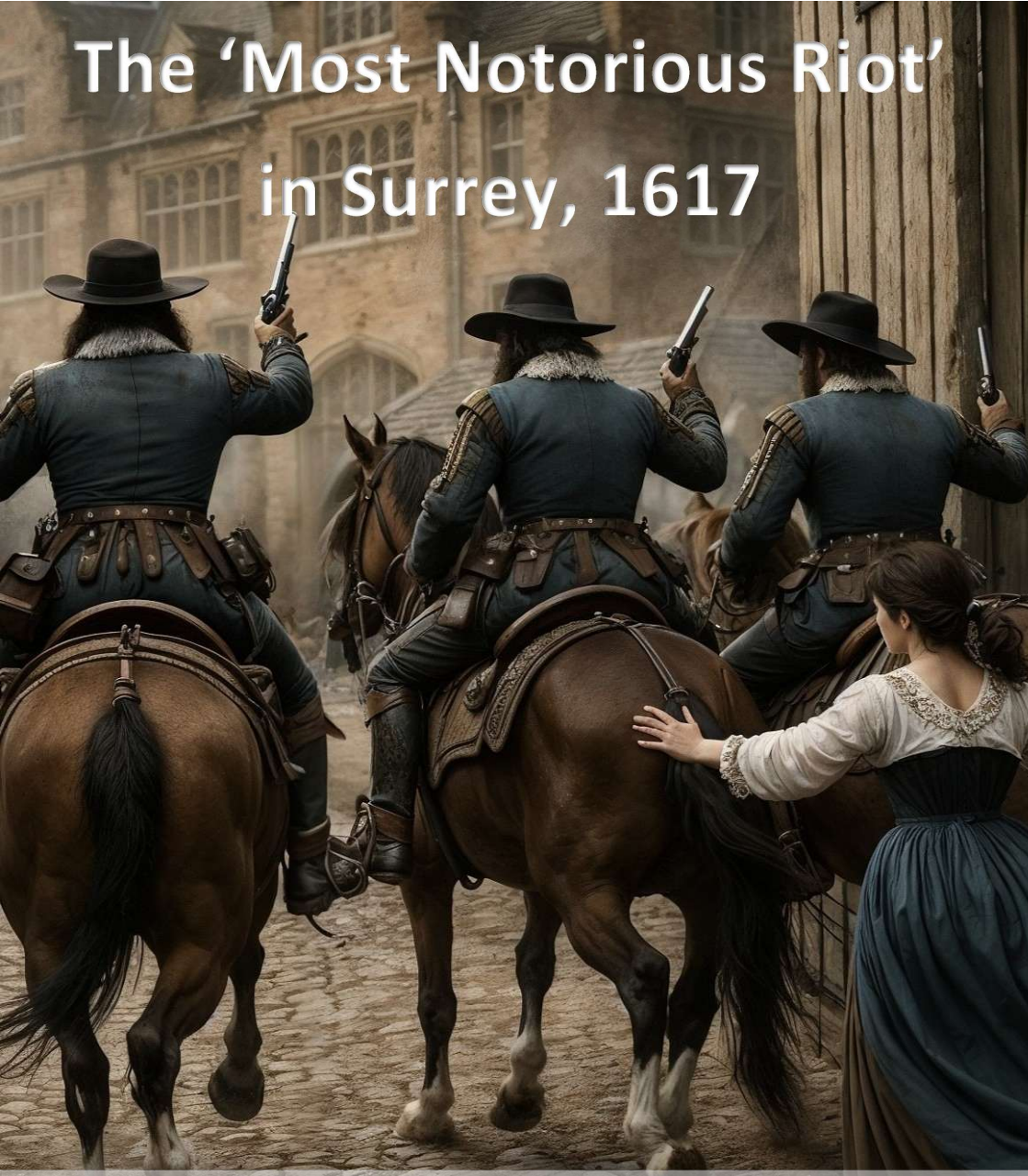
The ‘Most Notorious Riot’ in Surrey, 1617



By C.L. Dawson

CasaColori Local History Pamphlets

In the summer of 1617, a young heiress is violently abducted by her father, the celebrated lawyer Sir Edward Coke, from a stately home in Oatlands, not far from Hampton Court, where she had been hidden by her mother. This is the inevitable eruption of a struggle between Coke and his wife, Lady Elizabeth Hatton, for control of their daughter's future, as he has promised her in marriage to the brother of James I's latest passion, George Villiers, soon to become Duke of Buckingham.

Edward Coke is reeling from the loss of his coveted position as Lord Chief Justice of the King's Bench, the most important Judge of the realm, and his determination to win it back drives him on to ever more desperate acts. However, Lady Hatton is more than a match, organising an army of her family and friends to thwart his every move, and protect the wealth she has inherited from Sir Christopher Hatton, a favourite of Queen Elizabeth I. Their clashes draw in some of the most powerful forces in the country, including the King and his Privy Council, and after the 'riot' at Ashley House in Oatlands, are played out in public as the scandal circulates amongst the gossipmongers of St Paul's cathedral – the Internet of the day.

This is a true story assembled from eyewitness accounts that recounts, sometimes day-by-day, what happens in those torrid weeks to Frances Coke, just about to turn fifteen, who is dragged from pillar to post by her parents. Her experience of the tumultuous events will leave a lasting emotional legacy for the rest of her life.

The ‘Most Notorious Riot’ in Surrey 1617

A True Account of the Events at Ashley House in Oatlands, and How Lady Elizabeth Hatton Took on the Establishment.

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Part 1: Riot

Friday 11th July 1617: The Abduction at Ashley House

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 and through the stone gate 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 is the child's father, Sir Edward Coke[1], until recently Lord Chief Justice of the King's Bench, the most important judge

[1] Pronounced 'Cook'.

in the country. He is clutching a search warrant, and trying to read the writing which is jumping before his eyes due to the jolting of his coach on the rutted road. 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[2], a large red-brick mansion set in the middle of extensive parkland bordering Oatlands Park, which is being rented 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 had indeed arrived in the early hours of the morning with a young woman and her escorts on board.

[2] Known later as Ashley Park House.

As a man of law, Coke decided to obtain a search warrant before setting out himself for Oatlands. Unfortunately, the person responsible for signing this was Sir Francis Bacon, his arch enemy who, sensing trouble and an opportunity to obstruct Coke's plans, refused. So, he had to resort to his colleague, Sir Ralph Winwood, the Secretary of State, who was a little dubious, and Coke left somewhat suspicious of the validity of the piece of paper he was given. He had already summoned two of his sons from his first marriage to lead the advance party and so sent them ahead to stand guard and make sure that no-one entered or left the house. Sir Robert Coke, the eldest and heir who was living in Kingston, led the way, with Clement just behind. 'Fighting Clem', as he was known, was an excitable young man, having only recently recovered from injuries received in The Netherlands as the result of a duel, in which his adversary was killed, and it was only the intervention of the Ambassador, Sir Dudley Carleton[3], that had allowed him to be escorted home safely.

Some hours later, Robert and Clem Coke and their men 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, since the horses drawing her coach had indeed become worn out. 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

[3] As an ambassador serving abroad, Sir Dudley Carleton maintained correspondence with many courtiers and friends, chief among them John Chamberlain whose letters to him over 30 years are the foremost source of political and social commentary of the period, and which include an account of the events at Ashley House in 1617.

confront him. Being unsuccessful, she orders her servant to draw his sword, but clearly outnumbered, he declines. So, she stands resolutely 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 to his shouts to open the gates, Coke gives the order to break them down, which is done using a piece of timber lying nearby, with much damage to the gates and the brickwork of the gatehouse. The group then proceeds across the walled courtyard to the front of the house, 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 gang 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[4] 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, which under the terms of his warrant would be fully justifiable. On the other hand, he continues, should any of his own men be harmed, the full force of the law will be brought against the perpetrator, who could end up in jail or even hanged.

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

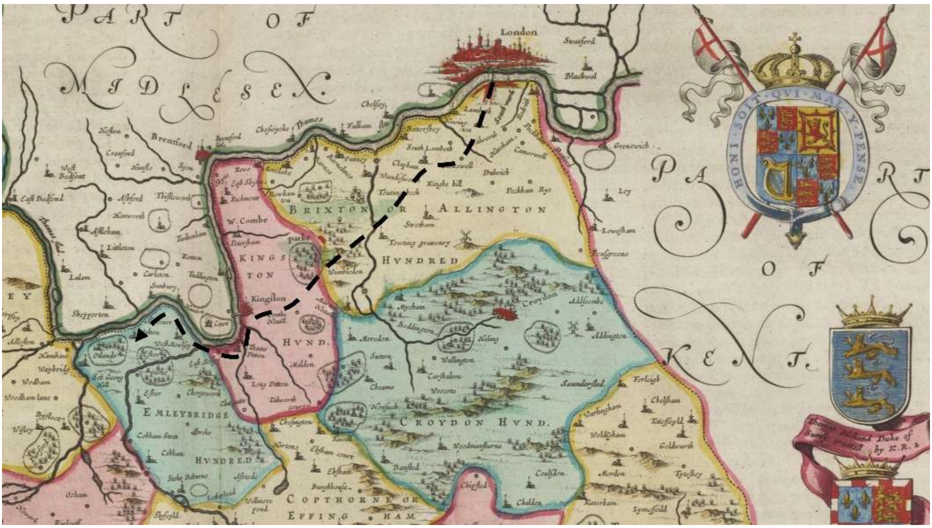
[4] The Withipoles had 12 children by 1617: five sons and seven daughters.

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.

A History of the Crime Scene

Towards the end of his reign, his health deteriorating but his passion for hunting undiminished, Henry VIII decided to create a hunting ground nearer to his favourite palace so that he did not have to travel far. In 1539 by an Act of Parliament, he bought up all of the Manors to the south of the river Thames for several miles west of Hampton Court, including: Walton-on-Thames, Walton Leigh, Oatlands; Byfleet; Weybridge; East Molesey, West Molesey, Sandown, Weston, Imber Court, and Esher. In Oatlands, he purchased (not without complaints from the owners) a moated manor house, and initially saw its potential to become a hunting lodge. Nearby, he acquired some farmland and a farmhouse, called 'Asheley', that had originally been part of Walton Leigh. This created Hampton Court Chase, and where it was not bordered by a river, he had a fence and ditch installed.

The hunting ground was managed by a 'Lieutenant and Keeper of the Chase,' who was also Housekeeper of Hampton Court Palace and Ranger of Bushy Park. In 1548, this role was given to Sir Michael Stanhope, in addition to his responsibilities as Keeper of Windsor Forest. Whether this had anything to do with his daughter Jane Stanhope’s purchase of the lease of the farmhouse and land at Ashley in 1602 can only be conjectured, since she was a young child of five at his death, but she would undoubtedly have known of her father’s connection to the area, and may have remembered visits to the much-altered hunting lodge — Oatlands Palace — and the nearby pretty stretch of the river Thames. By this time, the Chase had been dismantled, and Ashley had become part of the Royal Park of Oatlands, and, though still under royal ownership, leased to its Keeper. Maps do not show Ashley Park as a distinct area until well into the 1700s.



At the beginning of the 1600s, Jane Stanhope was known as Lady Berkeley, as a result of her second marriage to Sir Henry Berkeley, 7th Baron Berkeley, but they were estranged, and she was looking for a home for herself to spend her later years. The existing building at Ashley was an old farmhouse, and she had something much more elegant in mind, so she had it demolished and constructed a large red-brick house. Her estate manager, Richard Mason, kept detailed accounts of the building work, which included the suppliers of the materials and the names and charges of the local builders, carpenters, stone masons, plumbers, blacksmiths, and the carters who brought the materials from the Thames wharf to the site[5].

When completed in 1605, Ashley House was a masterpiece of Jacobean design, laid out on a long axis with wings at either end, each with arched bay windows and gabled roofs. The domestic quarters were in one wing, with the kitchens and household services in the other. The main part of the building had a double-height entrance hall with a magnificently carved oak staircase, off which were many wood-panelled rooms with fireplaces, resulting in clusters of chimneys on the roof. At the heart of the house was the great gallery, with Corinthian marble columns and pilasters lining the sides. The front entrance was a stone portico looking out onto an open courtyard surrounded by a high brick wall, into which a gatehouse was built. Beyond the walls, old barns had been removed and replaced by a corn loft, a coach-house and stables. A brewhouse, a gamekeeper's lodge, a rabbit warren and a pigeon house completed the outbuildings. The land nearest to the house was landscaped with ornamental

[5] These have survived, and include the names of the local tradesmen. See Sources for details.

trees and flowerbeds, and orchards were planted, with a ‘wilderness’ opening up onto 140 acres of parkland.

Ashley House, earliest known drawing c. 1800 (Elmbridge Museum).

The Implosion of a Tempestuous Marriage

The abduction at Ashley House was the unavoidable result of two interwoven causes: a tempestuous marriage that had been troubled for many years, and the more recent implosion of Sir Edward Coke's legal career.

Edward Coke had risen from a relatively modest background to become Elizabeth I's Attorney General — chief legal adviser to the sovereign and the government — in the latter years of her reign. Along the way, he had gained a reputation for both an utter devotion to the law, that allowed no time for socialising or leisure interests, and a temperament that even his friends would admit was arrogant, obnoxious and overbearing. Despite this, he had married well and had seven children who had survived into adulthood.

By contrast, Lady Hatton, originally Elizabeth Cecil, had been born into one of the most illustrious families of the period. Her grandfather was William Cecil, 1st Lord Burghley who had been Elizabeth I's chief adviser for almost 40 years, and her uncle was Robert Cecil, who became James I's Secretary of State and, amongst other successes, uncovered the Gunpowder Plot. In addition, through a first marriage in her teens, she had become extremely wealthy in her own right, since her husband, William Hatton, was heir to the estates of his uncle Sir Christopher Hatton who had been one of Elizabeth I's favourites. Lady Hatton shared some personality attributes with Edward Coke in that she was outspoken and headstrong, however this was due to a keen sense of the prestige of her background and the power of her inheritance, but she was highly sociable and a frequent participant in the increasingly popular court entertainments — the masques.

Three deaths contributed to their fates being entwined. Lady Hatton's husband died in 1597, making her a wealthy widow at barely 20 years of age, and Edward Coke's wife died in early 1598, leaving him with a young family to raise which he did not have the time, nor inclination, to put his mind to. A few months later, in June 1598, Lord Burghley died and it was at his funeral that Coke, then aged 46, made his approach to the Cecil family for permission to marry Elizabeth Hatton. He was not the only suitor, as she was also being pursued by Francis Bacon, already a noted scholar and intellectual, but he had previously sided with rivals of the Cecil family and thus it was Coke, in his senior legal role, who was considered the most useful ally.

Lady Hatton agreed to the marriage, but in a sign that she had some misgivings, insisted on a private ceremony at home, which caused problems as this did not conform to ecclesiastical rules, and the Archbishop of Canterbury had to intervene. She also stipulated, being conscious of the potential inheritance expectations of the numerous offspring of Coke's first marriage, that the wealth she brought to the marriage would be passed on only to those children that they might have together. These turned out to be Elizabeth, born in 1599, and Frances born in August 1602.

Having attempted to adopt a more sociable manner and make witty conversation, and made promises which he had no intention of keeping, and given in to her strange requests concerning the marriage ceremony (all of this in order to gain his bride and her inheritance) Edward Coke soon slipped back into his former experience of a marriage. In this, as a husband he controlled the finances — the properties, the incomes and outgoings, the loans and the debts, the dowries of his daughters — whilst his wife was responsible for household management and the raising of children, for which she was provided with an allowance. This was not Lady Hatton's view. By 1617, their disagreements had erupted into public, with Lady Hatton accusing him before the Privy Council of contempt against the King's commandments over her property rights, and for not providing her with a sufficient allowance, and he relating how she had emptied three of his houses of all of the furnishings — hangings, plate, and household stuff — and called him to his face a 'treacherous villain.'

In contrast to the ups and downs of his private life, Edward Coke's career had gone from strength to strength. He had been appointed Chief Justice of the King's Bench in 1613 by James I, had prosecuted some of the most notorious trials of the period — the Gunpowder plot; the Thomas Overbury poisoning — and had further improved his reputation as the leading authority on English Law through his writings[6]. He also had a place on the Privy Council, the select group of senior advisers to the King. However, in his passion and zeal for the common law, he had frequently opposed the King's viewpoint, which was that of the royal prerogative being the ultimate arbiter. In late 1616, he had been censured by the Privy Council for this which, combined with his apparent obstruction of the payment of some debts owed to the crown in relation to his inheritance of Lady Hatton's estates, led to his dismissal from office. For someone whose legal career meant everything, this was an untenable position, and he became a desperate man. In an enforced exile at his country home at Stoke Poges, he came up with a plan which was, in essence, to sell his younger daughter to the older brother of the King's new favourite, the Earl of Buckingham, in exchange for being restored to his previous offices. Or, as an observer put it: "He took his daughter to market."

§

[6] By 1617, Coke had published 11 volumes of his "Reports" of cases, designed to establish an authorised set of precedents to support the development of the common law. Later, he would write 'The Institutes of the Laws of England' which is the foundational document of the common law, and includes a chapter on 'The Jurisdiction of Forests' citing Henry VIII's Act of 1539 creating the Honour and Chase of Hampton Court.

King James I had returned to Scotland in March 1617 on a mission to unify the English and Scottish churches, for which there was much opposition. This was the first time since his ascension to the English throne that he had made the trip, which was to last for six months, and he 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: a Knighthood as Gentleman of the Bedchamber; Master of the King's Horse; and Earl of Buckingham[7]. This rapid rise in fortunes and influence had not endeared Buckingham, as he was now known, to everyone and Coke had in fact refused a request to appoint him as Chief Clerk in the Court of the King's Bench, a lucrative role with few responsibilities, when it became vacant. Buckingham's family, headed by his mother, Lady Compton, 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 he might regain Buckingham's support if he arranged a marriage between his daughter Frances and John Villiers, 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.

In the middle of June 1617, Coke persuaded Sir Ralph Winwood, his friend on the Privy Council, to pass on this advantageous proposal to Buckingham along with his hope that this would go some way to making up for

[7] He was later made Duke of Buckingham, a title by which he is better known.

his former lack of respect. There was, in return, a positive response from Scotland.

The major problem would not turn out to be that Coke gave no thought at all to the wishes of his fourteen-year-old daughter in the matter of her future circumstances, 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 it was this that triggered her actions in removing Frances to her cousin's house in Oatlands in the middle of the same night.

Saturday 12th July: Full Tilt

Lady Hatton's intense anger is not so much that she dislikes John Villiers, because in truth she barely knows him, it is more that she was not even consulted. All she had ever expected of her husband was that she would be allowed to pass on her inheritance — the estates and income she had brought to the marriage — to her own children as she saw fit. Yet now, he had paid an exorbitant price to please the King's new attachment.

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 reach Bacon's house on foot. He is asleep in bed, being unwell, and his servants refuse to wake him, so Lady Hatton is given a chair and is permitted to wait in an adjacent room. But after a few minutes, unable to contain herself, she tries to gain entry into his chamber, and alarmed, Bacon calls for his servants and as they open his door, she rushes in. Hearing what has happened, and seeing the highly emotional state of his visitor, Bacon advises her to prepare a petition detailing her complaint and he will convene a meeting of the Privy Council to review it the next day, even though it is a Sunday, the Lord's Day.

Bacon somehow finds the energy to write to Buckingham that evening. Possibly because he is still ill, or due to the unexpected presence of Lady Hatton, his reasoning is clouded and he warns him off supporting the marriage of his brother into a *"disgraced and troubled family"*, where *"the consent of neither the mother nor daughter is assured"*.

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

The eight members of the Privy Council[8] meet at Whitehall Palace on the afternoon of Sunday 13th July 1617. Bacon reads out the details of Lady

[8] They were: Sir Francis Bacon, Lord High Keeper; George Abbott, Archbishop of Canterbury; Sir Thomas Howard, 1st Earl of Suffolk and Lord High Treasurer; Sir Edward Somerset, 4th Earl of Worcester and Lord Privy Seal; William Knollys, 1st Earl of Banbury and Lord Viscount Wallingford; Sir Ralph Winwood, Secretary of State; Sir Fulke Greville, Chancellor of the Exchequer; and Sir Julius Caesar, Master of the Rolls.

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 a few days, which was not done secretly, but that her husband with his sons and 10 or 11 armed servants, brandishing a warrant that had supposedly come from the Privy Council themselves, had violently broken down the gates and doors and dragged her away, and that she, her mother, was now being refused access to her desperately sick child. The council agrees that there is cause for concern, and that Coke should bring his daughter to London as soon as possible and be invited to explain himself to them in person on Tuesday afternoon.

This being resolved, the meeting continues onto other matters, until there is a commotion in the corridor outside the Council Chamber where Lady

Hatton is pleading to be admitted. Sir Francis Bacon informs her of the decision made, but Lady Hatton is insistent that Frances is brought to London that same evening, as she must be so weakened by the violence and fright that she fears for her life. Eager to avoid further outbursts, a letter to Coke is prepared which repeats the complaint and humbly beseeches him to bring his daughter immediately to London to seek medical help. At 7pm, The Clerk of the Court, Mr Edmunds is despatched to Kingston to deliver the message and returns a few hours later, having seen Frances and being assured that her life is not in danger, with Coke's response that it is now too late in the day to bring her to London, but that he promises *"upon his peril"* to deliver her on Monday morning to Mr Edmunds' house, where accommodation has been arranged. This causes somewhat of a panic amongst the councillors since, given Coke's reputation, it is assumed that he is refusing the order and will not keep his promise. Accordingly, a new warrant is issued for an immediate surrender of his daughter to Mr Edmunds.

Monday 14th July 1617: Lady Hatton's Army

Lady Hatton, highly suspicious of her husband's delay in bringing Frances back, 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.

At the same time, brandishing his amended warrant, Mr Edmunds arrives at Sir Robert Coke's house outside Kingston and finds it occupied only by the servants. Whether he had been tipped off, or was simply taking precautions, Coke had already left by a different route, heading over Kingston Bridge and approaching London through Middlesex. As requested, he takes Frances to Mr Edmunds' house where a little later a small crowd of supporters from both sides gathers, and some disorder is threatened. Mr Edmunds, having returned, suggests that one representative from each party should be chosen to

stay with Frances, and Lady Compton (mother of John Villiers) and Lady Burghley (Lady Hatton's sister-in-law) are selected. It was noted that the guardians *"looked at the young gentlewoman so narrowly, as though they would have divided her equally betwixt them"*, and that they kept a mental note of the time each was spending with her *"for fear of lurching away her favour and striving who could speak most kindly to her"*.

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

In the afternoon, Coke appears at the Privy Council to explain himself, and is more than comfortable standing before them because, in his mind, he will soon be sitting on their side of the table again.

According to Coke, Lady Hatton's plan had been to take Frances to France, without a licence to leave the country. He also accuses her servants of spreading false rumours about John Villiers, with *"words of disgrace and reproach"*. Upon cross examination, he is unable to provide any evidence for either of these accusations. The council instructs him to answer the charge of 'riot[9] and force' at Oatlands, whereby he is accused of overstepping the bounds of the 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

[9] In the seventeenth century, the legal definition of a 'riot' was a gathering of three or more people to commit an illegal act, which did not necessarily (but often did) involve violence.

down in case after case for posterity — into his own hands for his own ends, and thereby has made a mockery of it. Coke answers that the law allows any father, at his own discretion, to break into anyone's house on pretence of seeking a fugitive daughter, if a demand for her return is refused.

The Privy Council, under the direction of Bacon, concludes that the level of violence undertaken at Sir Edmund Withipole's house by Coke and his sons, all *"persons of quality"*, in the absence of the King, must be severely punished, and that charges will be brought against him in the Star Chamber[10].

Frances Coke, having been dragged from pillar to post, is on the move again. On the orders of the council, she is moved to the house of Henry Yelverton, the Attorney General.

Furious at the turn of events, Coke writes to Buckingham that evening, defending himself from the accusations, and entering for the historical record the details of the house near Oatlands, rented for the summer from the Earl of Argyll by Sir Edmund Withipole. He embellishes a few activities (it was not the effectiveness of his spies that found his daughter's whereabouts, but *"God's divine providence"*) and omits some details (no pistols are mentioned) but admits that he has broken down doors to rescue her. But, like the lawyer he is, he has a reasoned argument for doing so: that he did not want the King to think for one moment, having agreed to the match of Villiers to his daughter, that he

[10] The Star Chamber is the court used by the Privy Council to prosecute offenders against the King, his commandments or property. It is separate from the common-law courts.

was complicit in hiding her away. And moreover, he only resorted to force because Withipole and his wife refused to hand her over.

A little later, a messenger called Randall begins the long journey to Scotland with Coke's letter in his saddlebag.

The Scottish (and Catholic) Connection

In 1610, five years after building Ashley House, Lady Berkeley sold the lease to Archibald Campbell, 7th Earl of Argyll, the signing being witnessed by her employee Richard Mason. The reason why is unclear, since she lived for a further eight years, and she did not re-marry, but it may be that she received an offer that she could not refuse. Campbell, or 'Argyll', was about to marry Anne Cornwallis, sister of Frances Cornwallis, Lady Withipole, both of whom were cousins of Lady Hatton. One reason for his purchase could have been its proximity to Oatlands Palace and to Queen Anna of Denmark, who was often resident there and to whom it was about to be granted for life. He would become her neighbour in effect.

Argyll had been part of the Scottish contingent which had accompanied her on her progress south in 1603 to join her husband[11], the newly anointed King James VI of Scotland and James I of England. They had stopped at Althorp in Northamptonshire, where a large party of representatives from noble English

[11] Argyll's presence was noted since he was observed to have had a quarrel with the Earl of Sussex.

families had rushed to meet the new Queen and gain favour, among them Lady Hatton and her Uncle William Cornwallis. It may be that it was here that Argyll first met Anne Cornwallis, although at the time he was in his late twenties, and she was thirteen. Nevertheless, there was a shared interest between all of them, in that the Cornwallis family were well known as Catholics, and Queen Anna was said to have converted to Roman Catholicism whilst in Scotland, although this was kept quiet so as not to adversely impact the monarchy. And later, in 1618, Argyll himself would leave the country suddenly, and convert to Roman Catholicism whilst in The Netherlands, which led to his being branded a traitor and exiled.

Argyll and his wife spent a few years in Ashley House, but he had property and commitments in Scotland and the house fell into a state of disrepair, so he decided to make some improvements and let it out. When Sir Edmund Withipole and his wife Frances rented Ashley House for the summer of 1617, they were therefore renting from her brother-in-law, married to her sister Anne, and were about to find themselves at the centre of a national scandal.

Friday 18th July 1617: The Travelling Secretary

Letters have been flying back and forth across the length of the country for several days. It is no longer clear who knows what, from whom and when. Winwood seems to have the most direct line with Scotland, via his counterpart

Thomas Lake who is the King's travelling secretary, and first receives indications of the way the King's opinion is moving, which is in the opposite direction to the Privy Council, and towards Coke.

Discreetly, Winwood arranges for Henry Yelverton, being currently in custody of the girl, to attempt to reconcile the parents, at least whilst awaiting further news. Remarkably, with the consent of both parties, Frances Coke is taken back to Hatton House.

The rest of the Privy Council, unaware of the context, heaves a sigh of relief and sends a long letter to Lake of the *"accident that hath happened"* summarising the events of the past few days. They are keen to stress their role in giving the matter some *"order and direction"* and *"thought it agreeable to our duty that his Majesty should rather hear of it from ourselves, than from reports"*.

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

The events at Oatlands might have remained private, or at least known only to those involved, had Lady Hatton not resolved in her distress to seek help from Edward Coke's greatest rival, and her previous suitor, Sir Francis Bacon. Once her petition was on paper, and then openly discussed, the news could not be contained.

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 to Sir Dudley Carleton. There is: the conveying away by Lady Hatton of Frances Coke to the Withipole's House; the abuse of the search warrant and the great violence of Coke's break-in; his appearance before the Privy Council, and charges to be heard at the Star Chamber. He mentions that the story is the talk of the town: *"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."*

John Chamberlain, a well-connected social commentator blessed with inherited wealth, obtains much of his information about the goings on at court (as he was not a courtier himself) 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' — including his contacts and friends, whilst outside in the churchyard he overhears conversations, and browses the stalls selling muckraking pamphlets.

Part 2: Royal Response

Sunday 20th July 1617: The King's Reply

At seven o'clock in the morning, Randall the courier arrives back at the Temple with a response from the King to Coke's letter to Buckingham. The round trip had taken several days[12], and events have moved on, but the royal views now must be fitted into the new circumstances, without being altered in any way that might later be taken, or misrepresented, as treasonable. The facts are now not only out of control, but out of synchronisation.

[12] According to Anne Sadler's correspondent (written on the 26th July 1617), Coke's letter was sent on the 12th July by the same courier, so it has taken eight days to receive the response. However, Coke's letter is dated the 15th July, written after appearing before the Privy Council, in which case it took five days. Holles complains that, for the average person wishing to communicate over long distances, the quality of messengers is poor, and that it can take a fortnight or more to send a letter and receive a reply.

In the afternoon, Coke meets with Winwood at Oatlands Palace where Queen Anna and the sixteen-year-old Prince Charles are 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 greater offence, and that the violence of Coke in Oatlands was simply the effort required to redress the situation. A commission of four is to be set up – the Archbishop, Bacon, Greville and Winwood – to examine why Frances Coke was first removed from her father's house, and in the meantime she is to be restored to Coke's guardianship and he is again responsible for where she resides.

In the evening, unaware of this development, members of Lady Hatton's faction are eagerly waiting for Coke to return to the Temple to confront him about the charges the Privy Council has laid against him, but he dismisses them with an excuse that he is working on the King's business.

The Coke and Hatton Factions

Sir Edward Coke's supporters, in addition to his sons, are a small, but very influential group. There is the Villiers family, notably Buckingham in collaboration with his mother directing everything, and then there is the King, who has in the matter of only a few weeks swung from contempt for Coke to comradeship. There is some argument as to whose side Queen Anna takes, as she is well practised in keeping her opinions to herself, although she meets with

Coke but appears still not to be on speaking terms with Lady Hatton following an indiscrete revelation of a private conversation concerning "uncivil words" about Lady Compton.

In order to have any hope of fighting back, Lady Hatton has roped in as many family and friends as she can muster, especially those who have been on the receiving end of Sir Edward Coke's anger in the past. These include[13]:

- Her brother, Sir William Cecil, and his wife, Lady Burghley; and their daughter, Elizabeth Cecil, and husband Sir Thomas Howard;
- Her brother-in-law, Edward Lord Denny, married to her sister Mary Cecil
- Her cousins: Frances Cornwallis, Lady Withipole and her husband Sir Edmund Withipole; and Henry Lord Danvers;
- Sir Robert Rich, married to her stepdaughter Frances Hatton;
- Sir Christopher Hatton, a relative of her first husband, and heir to part of the Hatton estates;
- Edward Sackville[14], brother of the 3rd Earl of Dorset who owned Knole in Kent;
- Sir John Holles, her private counsellor, also known as Lord Haughton;
- And until recent events, she would have included Sir Francis Bacon himself, who is also a cousin.

[13] See Appendix 1 for chart.

[14] His presence as one of the Lady Hatton's army at Putney is referred to by Anne Clifford, wife of the Earl of Dorset, in her famous diary for July 1617: "About this time there was a great stir about my Lady Hatton's daughter—my Brother Sackville undertaking to carry her away with men and horses."

The ownership and occupation of Ashley House is another way to understand how the members of the factions are linked, particularly the Hatton Faction. Six families are closely associated with the house in the seventeenth century: Stanhope; Berkeley; Cornwallis; Withipole; Coke and Villiers[15]. Despite possessing other stately homes, their members would all have been familiar with Ashley House and its obvious attractions of both privacy and proximity to society, being some twenty miles from London — far enough not to fear being overheard (unless you wanted the servants, who are notorious as sources of gossip, to hear) — but within easy reach of the court at Whitehall Palace when your presence was required.

Jane Stanhope, Lady Berkeley, married to Henry, 7th Baron Berkeley, was the first owner, although her brother Michael Stanhope acted as her Trustee. Michael's daughter (thus her niece) Elizabeth Stanhope, was married to George Berkeley, 8th Baron Berkeley, who had inherited his title from his grandfather, making him her step-grandson. George's sister, Theophila Berkeley, was married to Sir Robert Coke, Edward Coke's eldest son. Later, in 1621, Elizabeth Stanhope's sister, another Jane Stanhope, would marry Sir William Withipole, son of Sir Edmund and Frances, as her second husband. Another of Lady Berkeley's nieces, Anne Stanhope, by her eldest brother, was married to Sir John Holles, who was Lady Hatton's personal adviser. And in 1622, Sir Edward Coke and Lady Hatton's eldest daughter, Elizabeth Coke, whose presence and

[15] See Appendix 2 for chart.

experiences during the scandal involving her younger sister go unmentioned, would marry Sir Maurice Berkeley, from a 'junior branch' of the Berkeley family.

The next owner, Archibald Campbell, 7th Earl of Argyll, links Ashley House to Lady Hatton via her cousins: his wife, Anne Cornwallis and her sister, Frances Cornwallis, Lady Withipole.

And finally, in 1628, Ashley House was granted to Christopher Villiers, younger brother of John Villiers, as his main residence connected to his role as Lieutenant and Keeper of Hampton Court Chase.

Such inter-connectedness is not really such a surprise in an era of high infant mortality and limited life expectancy, when there were relatively few aristocratic families in any local area that shared the same religious or political views, whose large numbers of children needed to find suitable husbands and wives, and where second and third marriages were common.

Tuesday 22nd July 1617: A Notable Skirmish Avoided

Sir Gerrard Herbert writes a letter to Dudley Carleton with details about the near miss in the previous week between Coke's men and Lady Hatton's armed supporters on the road between London and Kingston:

"They met her not: if they had, there had been a notable skirmish; for the Lady Compton was with Mistress Frances in the coach, and there was Clem.

Coke, my Lord's fighting son, and they all swore they would die in the place before they would part with her."

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; and Francis Bacon's demeanour perceptibly alters, from self-importance to anxiety, as Buckingham is no longer replying to his letters.

The first meeting of the new commission takes place at Lambeth Palace on Wednesday 23rd July, and confirms the King's wishes in relation to Frances Coke, that she is returned to her father's care. Warrants are then issued for the arrest of those who have been involved in removing her from her father — including Sir Edmund Withipole, Lady Withipole, their eldest daughter, two of the servants from Ashley House, Sir John Holles, and his footman — to be brought before the commissioners, *"all jumbled together like Noah's ark"*, to decide how their 'abuses' will be punished.

Thursday 24th July 1617: Two Chambers in Kingston

On Thursday morning, Coke arrives at Hatton House accompanied by a Mr Py and Mr Ashby as witnesses, to present the orders from the commissioners and take re-possession of his daughter. At midday Coke, his wife and children, depart by coach and head to the Temple, where they provide a fleeting public exhibition of a happy family — a doting father and his two daughters dining together, with his wife sitting nearby at a window, sewing. They then set off for Sir Robert Coke's house in Kingston[16], with Lady Hatton sleeping most of the way to avoid conversation.

Frances Coke is shown to her bedroom, but her mother is unimpressed because it is a maid's room, the door is flimsy, does not have a lock on the inside, and opens out onto the main staircase. No accommodation is offered for Lady Hatton, not that she would have accepted it, so once Frances' own maid arrives at seven o'clock, she leaves and heads into Kingston where she searches for a house to rent but, none being available at short notice, is reduced to hiring two rooms.

From her meagre lodgings, she writes a *"long and tedious scribble"* to the King's commissioners, complaining about Frances' room, the lack of bolts, and the need for her to be allowed out for some fresh air, but most of all that

[16] Several letters mention the house being at 'Town's End' or 'Townsend' in Kingston, and a 'Town End Pier' exists today on the road towards Surbiton. Another letter mentions Sir Robert Coke's 'Manor House at Kingston', although none of the manors of the period — Coombe; Berwell; Chessington-at-Hoke; Canbury (or Canonbury); Hartington; or Norbiton Hall — were in Town's End.

they will allow a 'picture drawer' to visit so that she, her mother, in the absence of her child, can have an image to hold.

Friday 25th July 1617: A Sore Leg

Sir John Holles is brought before the King's commission at Lambeth at two o'clock in the afternoon, where he is questioned *"like a criminal"*: What does he know of the conveying away of Frances Coke? Did he send a French woman and his footman to escort her? Did he state, as was overheard, that if he had ordered her conveyance, she would not have been found so easily? Is he planning, with Lady Hatton, another escapade?

He complains bitterly about his arrest, especially that he too is now in the public eye where *"they hold a man condemned, if questioned"*, and blames a vendetta by Coke. The two men have been enemies ever since Holles was sentenced to a year in Fleet prison by Coke in the aftermath of the Thomas Overbury poisoning trial in 1615, where Holles was adjudged to have broken the law by intervening at the execution of one of the perpetrators. Not content with jailing him, Coke had humiliated him in public, calling him a 'fish out of water' at court. From prison, Holles had corresponded with Lady Hatton, whose hatred of Coke matched if not exceeded his, and since then they have collaborated in an attempt to bring about his downfall. Holles is more than just her private counsellor: he often drafts her letters, tempering her more emotional outpourings with diplomatic language, and writes them out in 'secretary hand'

— more than half of letters sent in her name in 1617 are 'penned by Lord Haughton'.

The Withipole's servants are arrested for defamation of John Villiers, and it was certainly in Lady Hatton's interests to cast doubt on his health. As soon as it was obvious that the position of Buckingham in relation to the King was likely to continue, the attention of those whose livelihoods were about to be impacted had turned to the status of his family. First impressions of John were positive; admittedly he was not as physically attractive as his younger brother, but he seemed respectable enough. However, it was soon noticed that there was an air of melancholy about him and that he was prone to periods where he withdrew in upon himself. There was also something wrong with his leg which, as a physical trait, is what was initially commented upon. Lady Hatton probably made a point of discussing what might be the problem in front of the servants, and soon the cause of John Villier's *"sore leg"* was a topic of gossip. Was it gout, or an ulcer, or a tumour that might limit his life expectancy? Was an unhealthy body indication of an unhealthy mind?

Coke takes it upon himself to interrogate Withipole's servants, confining them and talking of treason. Separately to the official commission, he is also pursuing his own agenda. He brings in a *"woman who sells chickens"* for questioning about spreading tittle-tattle concerning Sir John Villier's health, and under coercion she implicates the ferryman from Putney as her source.

Saturday 26th July 1617: A Correspondent from the Inner Temple

In 1862, the Master of Trinity College Cambridge sent a copy of a letter from the college library for publication in The Athenaeum, a journal for Literature, Science and the Fine Arts. The letter, written from the Inner Temple and dated 26th July 1617, was taken from a collection bequeathed to the college by Anne Sadler, Sir Edward Coke's eldest daughter, and gives an insider's account of the events. The exact identity of the writer is unknown since the signature has been torn off, but he refers to himself as a 'kinsman' and to her as his cousin. The tone is playful and gossipy, rather than outraged by the violence, and begins: *"Enter News, with a head like a fox, backed like a white lion, bellied like a countess, supported with two gouty legs, therefore hoped to hold but a little while; upon whose forehead may be read a strange story, without example, of a father deprived of his child against the law of nature."*

It reads as if the writer is saying: 'You would never guess what your father has done now!', although her father is oddly referred to throughout in the third person as *"My Lord Coke"*.

From this account is passed down to posterity: the scullery boy and the spaniel; the requisitioned packhorse; the scuffle for the pistol; the overturned coach; the troops 'that lay in Putney'; Randall bringing the King's reply; the warrant for Edmund Withipole's arrest; the doting father dining with his daughters; and the two chambers rented in Kingston.

Friday August 1st 1617: 'Myself Here a Prisoner'

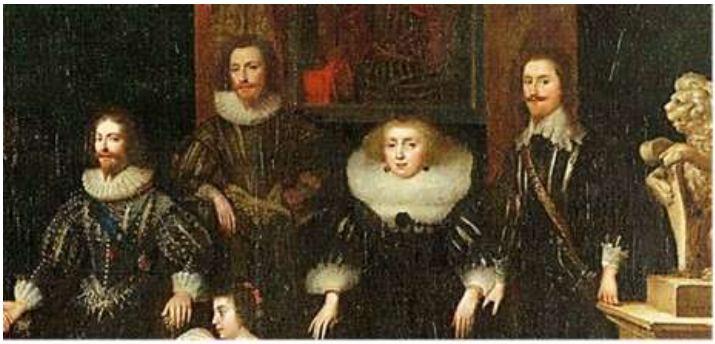
By the beginning of August, as the result of the conclusions of the King's commission, Lady Hatton is imprisoned or rather, as a woman of noble birth, she is confined to a house in Leadenhall Street belonging to Sir William Craven, who had been Lord Mayor of London in 1610.

She writes a letter to the Privy Council in which she bemoans her status: *"All my rights in my first husband's estate thereby cancelled, myself here a prisoner and in the King's disgrace."* Her husband has wasted no time in taking advantage of her absence to break into Hatton House, seize her coach and horses, dismiss her servants without wages. She begs for justice as she has *"suffered beyond the measure of either wife, mother, nay of any ordinary women in this kingdom, without respect to my father, my birth, my fortune, with which I have too highly raised him"*.

Saturday August 9th 1617: Little Sign of Yielding

Sir John Holles writes to Sir Thomas Howard, Earl of Suffolk and Lord Treasurer of England, updating him as a relative by marriage of Lady Hatton, of the goings on over the past few days.

Visits by Lady Hatton to her daughter in Kingston are allowed but limited to twice a week, and never alone. Despite the animosity of recent weeks, Lady Compton has called on her in London, in an attempt to make peace, declaring herself offended by Coke's violence and assuring her that she and her son would never 'meddle' with Frances without the consent of both of them. This despite reports from Holles that *"the young gentlewoman is straightly besieged at Kingston, visited every day by my Lady Compton and Sir John Villiers, yet little sign of yielding"*.



The Villiers Family: George (left) John (m) and Kit (right) with their mother, Lady Compton c. 1628.

The relationship between Lady Hatton and Lady Compton is complicated. Despite claiming that she had never even entertained the thought of her daughter's marriage to Sir John Villiers, Lady Hatton had in fact hedged her bets. In the lull between Coke's original plan in late 1616 and his negotiated agreement in July 1617, she had sent Holles twice as a go-between to test the

ground, to see if Lady Compton might deal directly with her instead of her husband, as it was she who controlled the inherited estates. On the last occasion, Holles had seen Coke's coach draw up outside, and it was evident that Lady Hatton was being rebuffed.

Tuesday August 12th 1617: A Change of Tactics

Now that the King's viewpoint is widely known, family and friends are notably less vocal in their support of Lady Hatton, particularly in public. Bacon, being most exposed, is backtracking rapidly, having received heavy criticism from the King in a letter to which he responds that it: *"...contains some matter of dislike, in which respect it hath grieved me more than any event which hath fallen out in my life"*.

When Buckingham does finally reply to his several fawning letters, it is short and to the point: *"In this business of my brother's that you over trouble yourself with, I understand from London by some of my friends that you have carried yourself with much scorn and neglect both toward myself and friends."*

Lady Hatton changes tactics. She produces a 'pre-contract letter' in her daughter's own handwriting, dated 10th July 1617, which bluntly states that she cannot marry John Villiers for the simple reason that she is already betrothed to someone else, namely Henry de Vere, 18th Earl of Oxford. It is difficult to imagine when mother and daughter would have had the time to discuss the matter and draft the contract on that particular day, as much of it must have been spent planning the escape, and there is no mention of the existence of this document that can be definitively dated before the 12th August when Sir Horace de Vere, of whom Henry de Vere was a first cousin once removed, wrote to Carleton about Lady Hatton pleading a 'pre-contract of the lady.'

The selection of Henry de Vere as the most suitable suitor had taken some careful consideration. He was of the right age and pedigree, and although Lady Hatton thought that some might protest that he was her cousin, given that his father's first wife had been her aunt, she could argue that he was the child of a second wife, which did not really count. The main problem was that de Vere had been abroad for the past four years, spending his inheritance on an extended Grand Tour of Europe, and was therefore not easily contactable to ensure his consent; but this was a minor issue given the urgency of the situation. With the certainty that he would agree once he had the opportunity to reply to her letter, Lady Hatton had set down, in handwriting 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[17].

Frances had been pleasantly surprised to be the subject of Henry de Vere's passion, and was content to go along with her mother's advice that that she should write to her father explaining the new situation. Following the words her mother suggested, Frances wrote them out, and at the bottom after her signature, she added *"signed in the presence of my mother"*.

Thursday August 14th 1617: Brittle Glass

Coke, Winwood and Lady Compton turn up uninvited to Leadenhall Street on Thursday, where they find Lady Hatton in conversation with Holles and her brother-in-law, Sir Edward Denny. Despite acknowledging the existence of a pre-contract letter, Coke bluntly asks for his wife's consent to the marriage, insisting that the young couple are in love. Lady Hatton refuses, and they leave with Coke telling her she is forbidden to see her daughter. Holles observes that the situation is like *"brittle glass"*.

Coke is quick to act. Within days of being alerted to Frances' letter affirming the pre-contract, a letter in the same handwriting, addressed to her

[17] Henry de Vere did eventually marry into Lady Hatton's family, when seven years later in 1624 he married her niece, Diana Cecil. This followed his release from the Tower of London where he had been sent having made disparaging comments concerning the (now) Duke of Buckingham in which he said that he "hoped the time would come when justice would be free, and not pass only through Buckingham's hands.

mother, is made public. Unsurprisingly, a less than subtle hint of legal language is apparent. Frances, now *"aware that as a mere child, and not understanding the world or what is good for myself"*, resolves to be ruled by her parents and seeks their reconciliation. As for John Villiers, she has retracted her opposition, but is less than effusive: he is *"himself is not to be misliked"*. Like her previous letter, there is 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 speculation circulating St Pauls that the now notoriously violent Coke, who has stood over accused prisoners on the rack without remorse, has beaten his daughter into submission by tying her to a bedpost and the use of a whip.

Sunday August 25th 1617: Curtains

Lady Compton shows off Frances Coke at court, where Queen Anna makes an *"exceeding fuss"* of her, treating her as if she is a valuable asset to be studied from all angles, *"even as one would of a good sword, or a horse for a day of battle"*.

In contempt of her ban, Lady Hatton goes to Kingston, but the door is answered by Clem Coke and *"that rabble"*, who refuse her entry. On the return she crosses paths with Lady Compton's coach, which is curtained, although she thinks she catches a glimpse of Frances inside.

Part 3: Restoration

Tuesday 2nd September 1617: The Weightiest Instrument

By early September, despite being asked to do so by the King, Lady Hatton has been unable, or unwilling, to provide the letter from Henry de Vere for inspection, and so it is judged to be a forgery. The path to the marriage of Frances Coke and John Villiers is clear of all obstructions.

Coke goes to Coventry to meet the King and Buckingham on their way back from Scotland to London where they aim to arrive in the middle of the month. Yelverton, who is also present, writes to Francis Bacon, explaining Coke's tactics: how he speaks to the King *via "…the weightiest instrument, the Earl of Buckingham, who as I see sets him as close to him as his shirt, the Earl speaking in Sir Edward's phrase"*. Now returned to the King's favour, able to engage with him publicly but also converse with him privately, Coke's behaviour has reverted to his obnoxiousness 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.

Yelverton offers Bacon some words of advice: he must also meet the King before he arrives back to London; he must maintain that all decisions taken in the matter were made jointly by the Privy Council members; that he should respond to Coke's criticisms by reminding the King of Coke's violent behaviour; and, finally, that he must burn this letter.

Wednesday 10th September 1617: Bargaining Power

Not wishing to say so to her face, Holles writes a convoluted letter to Lady Hatton in which he delicately suggests that the case is lost. She should use what bargaining power remains — passing on her inherited lands — to beg forgiveness.

Together, they run through several drafts of a letter to King James, trying to find the right content and tone: She had waited to reserve her full account of herself until his Majesty's return to court, but has heard he is displeased and offended with her; she had wanted the business with her estates to be concluded before any marriage arrangements; all she needed was to hear from Frances herself, that she consented to be married to Sir John Villiers, but was denied visiting rights.

She does not, explicitly, give her own consent to the marriage.

Sunday 28th September 1617: Restoration

Coke is restored to the Privy Council; but there is no indication as to if, or when, he will become Chief Justice of the King's bench again.

Monday September 29th 1617: Michaelmas Wedding

The day of the wedding of Sir John Villiers and Frances Coke arrives. It is Michaelmas, marking the end of the golden days of the harvest, and the approach of the darker nights and colder days of winter.

Nine coaches with the wedding party leave Sir Robert Coke's house in 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, under the vaulted ceiling with gold stars set against a blue background – another star chamber. King James I and Queen Anna of Denmark attend, along with many courtiers and the Archbishop of Canterbury. The Villiers family is present — mother, two other sons and a sister — 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

Within days of regaining his place on the Privy Council, Coke brings formal charges against his troublesome wife:

Item: For conveying away her daughter silently and secretly;

Item: For endeavouring to bind her to my Lord Oxford without her father's consent;

Item: For counterfeiting a letter of my Lord Oxford offering her marriage;

> Item: For plotting to surprise her daughter and take her away by force, to the breach of the King's peace, and for that purpose assembling a body of desperate fellows, whereof the consequences might have been dangerous.

This has immediate results. Having concluded his daily visit to the whispering gallery of St Paul's, John Chamberlain informs Dudley Carleton by letter on the 11th October that Lady Hatton *"lies still at Sir William Craven's, crazy in body and sick in mind"*.

Sir John Holles prepares a series of notes for her in anticipation of an appearance before the Star Chamber, that suggest responses she might make, stressing that the only way to respond to *"people who speak no language but thunder and lightning"* is to calmly defend herself and dismantle their arguments.

On the charge of conveying her daughter away secretly: she should state that it was Frances who asked for help, being opposed to the marriage, and that she was only sending her away for a few days to Oatlands for peace and quiet; and moreover that she did not think to tell her husband because he had never before shown any interest in his daughter's whereabouts.

On the charge of attempting to bind her daughter to the Earl of Oxford: she should reply firstly that she had been reminded of a previous offer concerning Henry de Vere, and gave it to Frances to peruse and consider, who afterwards cheerfully wrote out a letter to her father expressing her wishes and signing it of her own free will; and secondly, that Edward Coke knew of the match since he had seen correspondence from de Vere's mother, but had said previously that they were too young to marry; and thirdly, that Coke had always left his daughter's care to his wife and never shown any care for her, as he knew Frances would inherit her mother's fortune.

On the charge of not providing the Earl of Oxford's letter as requested by the King, which shows that she has counterfeited it, by which she has doubled and trebled a high contempt for his Majesty: To which she should maintain that she has been sick in bed, and did not know that the letter

was forged, and that in any case, it only served to highlight to Frances that there might be other options that might sustain her in the terrible circumstances she found herself in, being chased and captured, and barred from seeing those closest to her.

On the charge of assembling a body of desperate fellows in a plot to re-capture her daughter: She should deny any knowledge of this, and ask for any evidence that such a group was assembled, since there is none; moreover, any actions she might take could only pale into insignificance to those of 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 fellows, well weaponed, without warning, he took down the doors of the gatehouse, and of the house itself, and tore the daughter in that barbarous manner from her mother, and would not allow her near her after that. 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, for any right to which he pretends, then it is lawful for any man with 100, nay with 500, and consequently with as many as he can draw together, to do the same; which may encourage all notorious and rebellious malefactors, and endanger the safety of the King's person, and the peace of the kingdom.

Friday 31st October 1617: To Fetch Her As It Were In Pomp

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 consent to the marriage.

It is as if King James has been waiting for just this change of heart, since immediately he sends Buckingham to personally *"fetch her as it were in pomp"* in a fleet of coaches from Sir William Craven's house, and set her down at the Cecil family home, Burghley House, on the Strand.

Saturday 8th November: Lady Hatton's Feast

The return to grace of Lady Hatton is confirmed barely a week later, when she hosts a dinner party at Hatton House where the King and Queen are guests of honour. During the feast, the King creates four new knights, one of which is Sir William Withipole, son of her cousin Lady Withipole. Sir Edward Coke is pointedly not invited, nor are any of his servants admitted. She is heard to say of her husband that *"if he came in one door, I would go out at another"*, and that *"I would sooner be friends with the Devil"*.

Aftermath

As the New Year celebrations of 1618 took place at court, and reflections were made on the incidents of the previous summer and autumn, it was not clear to observers and commentators who had 'won', and if winning had brought benefits or not. Sir Edward Coke had returned to the Privy Council, but had lost forever his coveted role as Chief Justice. Lady Hatton, though initially much derided by the establishment for her dramatic reaction to not being consulted about her daughter's future, had regained her place in society. Both were significantly out of pocket; both had seen their private lives and reputations dissected by the Paul's Walkers.

It was fortunate that no-one had been killed. At Ashley House, blood was up, weapons were drawn, people were resisting. On the road near Putney, sixty armed men waited for a sight of their enemy, who had mercifully chosen an alternative route. The more excitable members of each faction claimed they were willing to die for their cause. Power and prestige was at play at court, and wrong moves were made which, with treason always a whisper away, could have proven fatal.

The major factor that distorted events was the absence of the King, which disrupted the flow of government that was seldom smooth, even when his ruling could be sought directly in person. His remoteness, with the noise from the myriad of petitioners being filtered through his overwhelmed travelling secretary, caused chaos at court because it took many fretful days to receive his

opinion. Buckingham, unschooled in national politics, was the pivot and his youthful perspective became paramount. Without his influence, as Holles pointed out, it was hard to understand why the Privy Council was taking so much interest in the machinations of a failed marriage and the tug-of-war over an ill-treated daughter.

Everything was amplified as a result: Coke's violent over-reaction was due to his fear of not being able to fulfil his promise to Buckingham; Lady Hatton's counter-attack was an exaggerated response to Coke's 'winning at all costs' attitude. Both sides used the argument that, with the King in Scotland, any riot could easily become a major uprising if hijacked by 'rebellious malefactors'.

The Married Life of Frances Coke and John Villiers

There was no commentary in letters or official papers of the impact that the 'most notorious riot' at Oatlands and subsequent events, or of being raised by such mismatched parents, had on the wellbeing of Frances Coke. However, the story of the rest of her life provides a clue.

Unsurprisingly, her 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 — he would on occasion smash his hand through panes of glass — during which he was encouraged to leave court for his own good and for the protection of those around him, for the peace and quiet of the countryside. Frances did not stand by his side, but instead took a lover, Sir Robert Howard, with whom she had an illegitimate child, although she often claimed, when it suited her purposes, that he was in fact the son of John Villiers. This caused yet another scandal, resulting in a warrant from King Charles I for her arrest on adultery charges, and she fled into exile, spending several years in Paris where she converted to Roman Catholicism. The boy

suffered from a crisis of identity: he was at different times known as Robert Wright or Howard or Villiers or Danvers.

Lady Hatton

The wrangling with her husband continued into Spring. Now with the upper hand, she petitioned for his appearance before the Star Chamber. At the end of March 1618, he was made ill by the stress: *"The Lady Hatton prevails exceedingly against her husband and has driven him into a numbness of one side, which is a forerunner of the dead palsy, though now he be somewhat recovered"*.

They continued to live separate lives, and were never reconciled.

Sir Edward Coke

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

By the time he left the country in 1618 and converted to Catholicism, and aware of the personal implications, Archibald Campbell, 7th Earl of Argyll, had assigned his properties, including Ashley House, to his son and heir. In 1626, the original royal lease expired and the house and park reverted to the crown. In 1628, George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham, was assassinated and King Charles I, keen to take care of the remaining members of his family, appointed his younger brother Christopher 'Kit' Villiers as Lord Lieutenant of Hampton Court Chase and Bushy Park, and he was granted Ashley House as his main residence. Variously 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 at auction by the trustees of the recently deceased final owner in 1923. Whilst the land was sold for development, no-one wanted the 'Tudor House' as it was referred to in the advertisements, and it remained empty until 1925 when the interior of the 100 foot long 'ball-room' – its panelling, fireplaces, columns, pilasters, friezes, shutters and shutter boxes – was removed and taken to Roberson's Gallery in Knightsbridge, where (according to one source[18]) it was sold to an American private buyer and shipped overseas. The rest of the building was demolished, and the materials auctioned off.

[18] Walton and Weybridge – A Dictionary of Local History.

Authors Note

The Julian calendar is used for days and dates, as this is how they were recorded in the contemporary sources.

I have adjusted some of the quotes into modern English for easier reading, whilst keeping the words as close to the original as possible.

The photorealistic images are AI-generated.

Sources

Primary Sources:

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Letters and Life of Francis Bacon edited by James Spedding; published by Longman 1857-74

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The Life of Sir Edward Coke by Cuthbert William Johnson 1845

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History of Parliament Online

Walton-on-Thames and Weybridge – A Dictionary of Local History by George Baur Greenwood; published by Martin and Greenwood Publications 1969

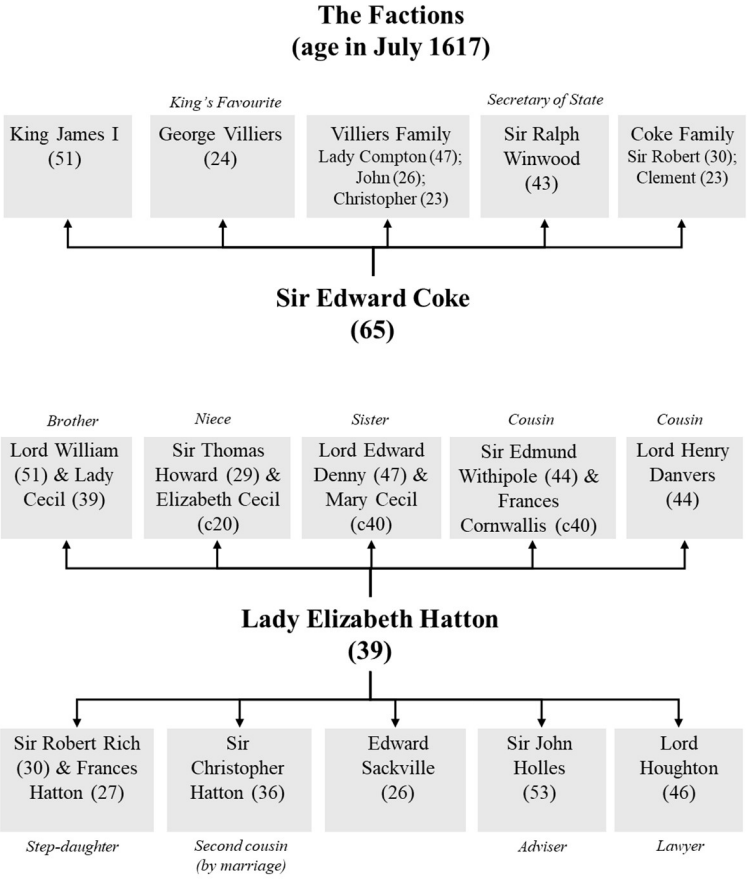
Further Reading:

The Curious Case of Lady Purbeck by Thomas Longueville 1909

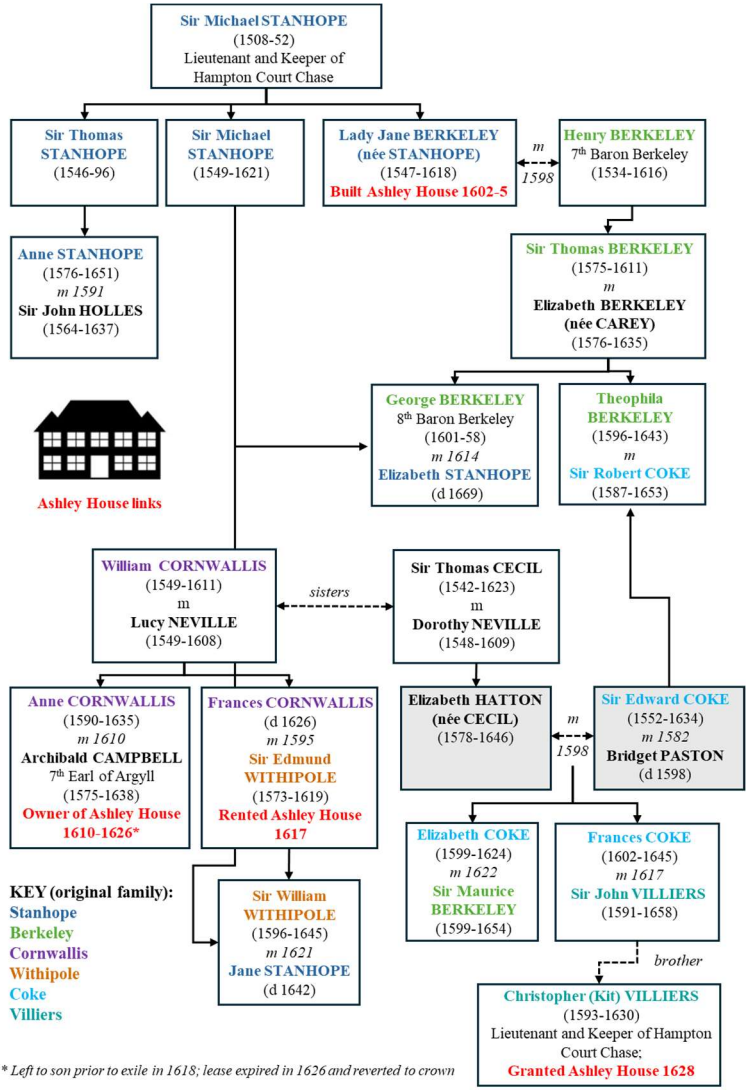
The Lady of Bleeding Heart Yard (Biography of Lady Hatton) by Laura Norsworthy 1935

Love, Madness and Scandal by Johanna Luthman; published by Oxford University Press 2017

Appendix 1: The Coke and Hatton Factions



Appendix 2: Ashley House Connections



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About the Author

C.L. Dawson is a local historian from Elmbridge in Surrey. Unsurprisingly, given the proximity of Hampton Court, his preferred periods are the Tudors and Stuarts. He focuses on researching and writing engaging stories involving local people, ideally finding connections where they came into contact with famous faces or key events, and whenever possible using eyewitness accounts from antique books, letters, diaries, pamphlets, and other primary sources.

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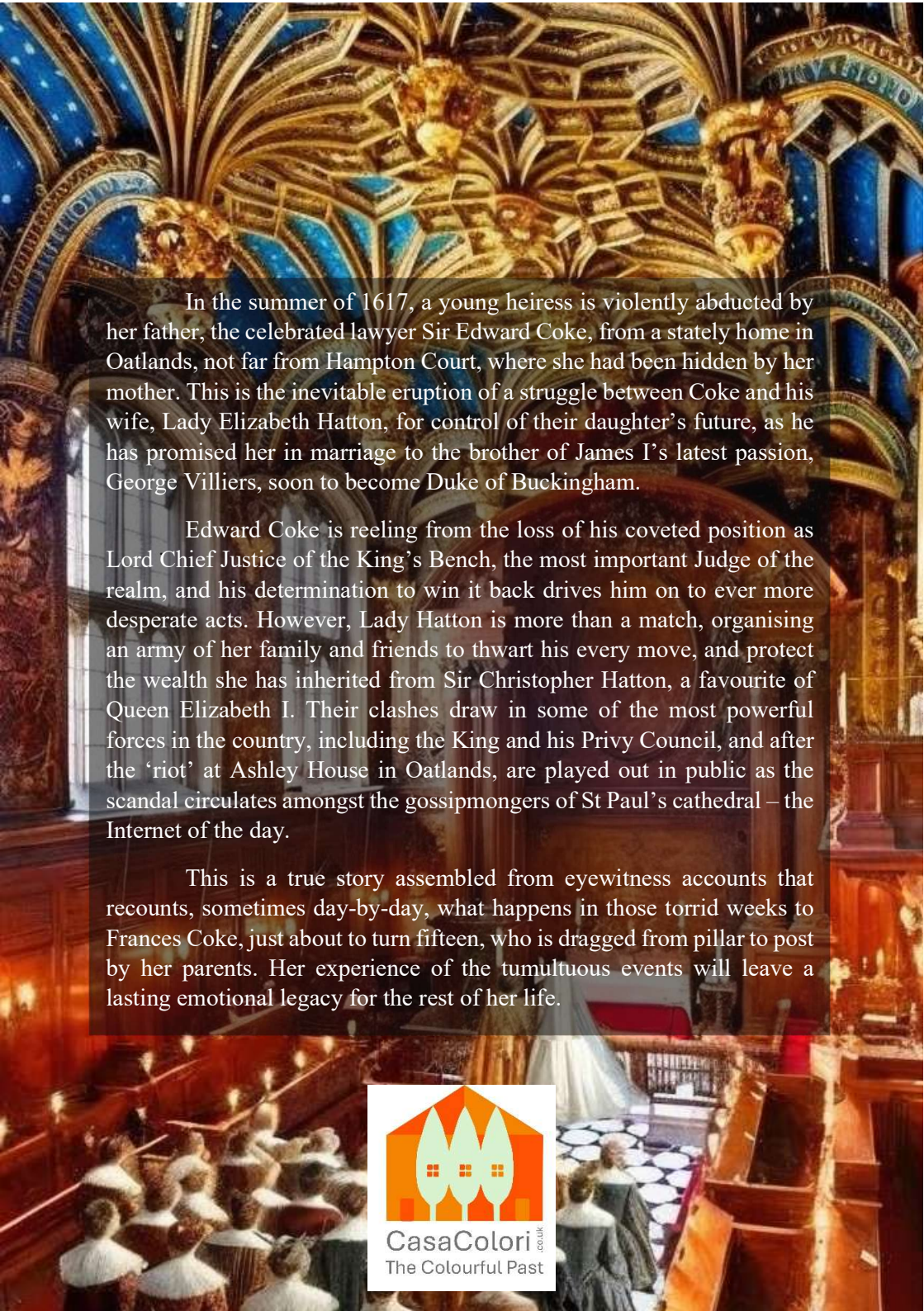

In the summer of 1617, a young heiress is violently abducted by her father, the celebrated lawyer Sir Edward Coke, from a stately home in Oatlands, not far from Hampton Court, where she had been hidden by her mother. This is the inevitable eruption of a struggle between Coke and his wife, Lady Elizabeth Hatton, for control of their daughter's future, as he has promised her in marriage to the brother of James I's latest passion, George Villiers, soon to become Duke of Buckingham.

Edward Coke is reeling from the loss of his coveted position as Lord Chief Justice of the King's Bench, the most important Judge of the realm, and his determination to win it back drives him on to ever more desperate acts. However, Lady Hatton is more than a match, organising an army of her family and friends to thwart his every move, and protect the wealth she has inherited from Sir Christopher Hatton, a favourite of Queen Elizabeth I. Their clashes draw in some of the most powerful forces in the country, including the King and his Privy Council, and after the 'riot' at Ashley House in Oatlands, are played out in public as the scandal circulates amongst the gossipmongers of St Paul's cathedral – the Internet of the day.

This is a true story assembled from eyewitness accounts that recounts, sometimes day-by-day, what happens in those torrid weeks to Frances Coke, just about to turn fifteen, who is dragged from pillar to post by her parents. Her experience of the tumultuous events will leave a lasting emotional legacy for the rest of her life.

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