

THE HAMPSHIRE BEACON PLOT OF 1586

By J. D. JONES

IN HIS paper *A Hampshire Plot*¹ Mr. H. T. White described an abortive conspiracy to fire the Hampshire signal beacons in 1586. The source of this account was the set of interrogations of the prisoners, now among the Domestic State Papers in the Public Record Office². This material was fragmentary owing to the severe fading of the documents, but it has since been possible by photographic copying to retrieve a reasonably complete transcript of the evidence. Further material has come to light also from other sources, making possible a reassessment of the course and success of this conspiracy.

The plot was long in germinating, but its overt beginning was early in May 1586 when Zachary Mansell, a weaver, and William Mitchell, a tailor – both of Hartley Mauditt – set out to deliver a load of kerseys to a clothier called Bowyer, in Guildford. Between Holybourne and Froyle they came up with another traveller, 'of meane stature and about the age of fiftie yeres havinge a reddish beard and a simple graye Cloke and a lether payre of Britches'.³ He was described variously as being from Dorset or Cornwall, or simply as a 'Western man'.⁴ Conversation began on the one topic that occupied most people's minds at that time: the high cost of corn and food. What was the local cost of food, the stranger asked. Mansell answered that 'it was very deare for poore men'.⁵ Their companion – whose name was never disclosed – began to spell out the conditions of hardship in the West Country. Wheat was fetching 5s. a bushel in Dorset, 6s. in Cornwall, even 8s. in Bristol, 'and generally so hard & deare, that poore men could not contynue longe in this sort'.⁶ There was a more particular grievance, too: much of the best arable land was being sown with woad. Hampshire must have been buzzing with news of a riot at Romsey at the beginning of May, when a local farmer, Robert Cooper, was believed to have sown a woad acreage in excess of the Government-imposed quota.⁷ Certainly this was the next grievance ventilated by the three companions.⁸ By now their progress should have brought them within sight of the signal beacons at Crondall (fig. 33, no. 4). Whether or not prompted by this, the conversation took on a seditious tone. The effects of the accidental firing of one or more of this elaborate chain of beacon signals⁹ were well known. In June 1560 the lighting of the beacons in the Isle of Wight and at Portsdown had caused ripples of chaos as far inland as Berkshire;¹⁰ and there had just been a further case when an accidental fire in Bath was mistaken for an alarm by the beacon watchers.¹¹ The traveller from the west country may have been referring to this incident when he told Mansell and Mitchell

¹ *PHFC*, 12 (1932), 54–60.

² *PRO*, SP.12/191/15 and SP.12/191/20, henceforth abbreviated to the main document numbers (15 and 20) followed by the sub-item numbers in Roman numerals, e.g. 15, iii for SP.12/191/15, iii.

³ 20, iii.

⁴ 15, vii; 15, x; 20, iii.

⁵ 15, viii.

⁶ 15, xv; 15, viii.

⁷ SP.12/189/15.

⁸ 15, xv.

⁹ *PHFC*, 10 (1931), 252–278.

¹⁰ SP.12/12/48 and 49.

¹¹ *APC*, NS.14 (1586–7), 93 (Council meeting 6 May 1586).

that 'dyvers poor men had bin uppe in Cornwall, and in other Shyres Westward'.¹² It was only a short step to the next stage: to arrange for the deliberate firing of some beacons in order that the people should gather together and be issued with weapons,¹³ and then to proceed with the looting of barns and storehouses.¹⁴ Full of the possibilities of this idea, the conspirators, now arrived at Farnham, went to an inn to discuss details. It was agreed that the beacons should be fired both in Hampshire and in the west country on Monday night, 6 June. The 'Western man' asked for a confirmatory letter to take back with him, but Mansell had at least enough prudence not to commit himself in writing.¹⁵ A rendezvous was agreed, at Alton, within a week; and the stranger then continued on his way towards Guildford with Mitchell, while Mansell hurried back to Hartley Mauditt.¹⁶

One of Mansell's earliest recruits was William Stevens, a Farringdon tailor, whom he met on about 8 May at a place called 'Worldham Oke' between Hartley and Norton. 'I am a poore man . . . and soe art thow,' said Mansell, 'and if thow wilt do what I and others will doe then ryse [uppe] and have Corne.' He went on to describe his meeting with the 'Western man' and the planned firing of the beacons with a concerted rising in the west country; and he added that he (Mansell) 'had ben about it this quarter of a yere and that he had ben in dorsetshire & Cornwall'.¹⁷ Stevens seems to have shown no enthusiasm for the venture, but he did agree to meet Mansell in the Whitsun holidays, and he seems to have accepted responsibility for firing the beacons at Whitchurch¹⁸ (fig. 33, no. 2).

Mansell's next approach was more cautious. On about Thursday, 12 May, a Selborne tailor, Richard Passenger, on his way out of Farnham, found Mansell at a watering place giving his horse a drink. Mansell asked Passenger 'howe he liked of this hard worlde that poore men could not live for that Corne was so deare'. God would remedy it when it pleased Him, said Passenger. 'Poor men,' persisted Mansell, 'muste seeke some redresse (and) take it where it was to be had'.¹⁹ About a week later Mansell enlisted a fateful recruit. On Thursday, 19 May, he met, in Hartley, a local farm worker, Richard Noyse. Mansell announced 'that he had a thinge to tell him but he would not tell it before he should sweare to kepe his counsell'. The next day, Noyse having given the necessary assurance, Mansell said that he, William Mitchell, Richard Passenger, William Musgrove (a tailor, of Selborne), Geoffrey Carey (a weaver, of Alton), and William Stevens 'were purposed to set the Beacons on fire, and that Mansell himself would fire Crondall Beacons and Stevens should fire Whitchurche Beacon'.²⁰

By the Whitsun holiday the circle of plotters had widened further. On Whit Sunday, 22 May, Richard Passenger accompanied a William Silver on a visit to Robert Deacon, a tanner living in Worldham, to collect forty shillings owing for some clothing. Passing through Farringdon on their way back, they saw Robert Hassall, a local butcher, standing outside an alehouse. He invited them both in for a drink, and soon broached the current topic of conversation: 'Here ys a deer world, but yt wilbe [remedied] ere

¹² 15, viii.

¹³ 20, ix.

¹⁴ 15, vii.

¹⁵ 20, vii.

¹⁶ 15, ii; 20, iii.

¹⁷ 15, x; 15, xv.

¹⁸ 15, xv; 20, vii.

¹⁹ 15, xv; 20, iii.

²⁰ 20, vii.

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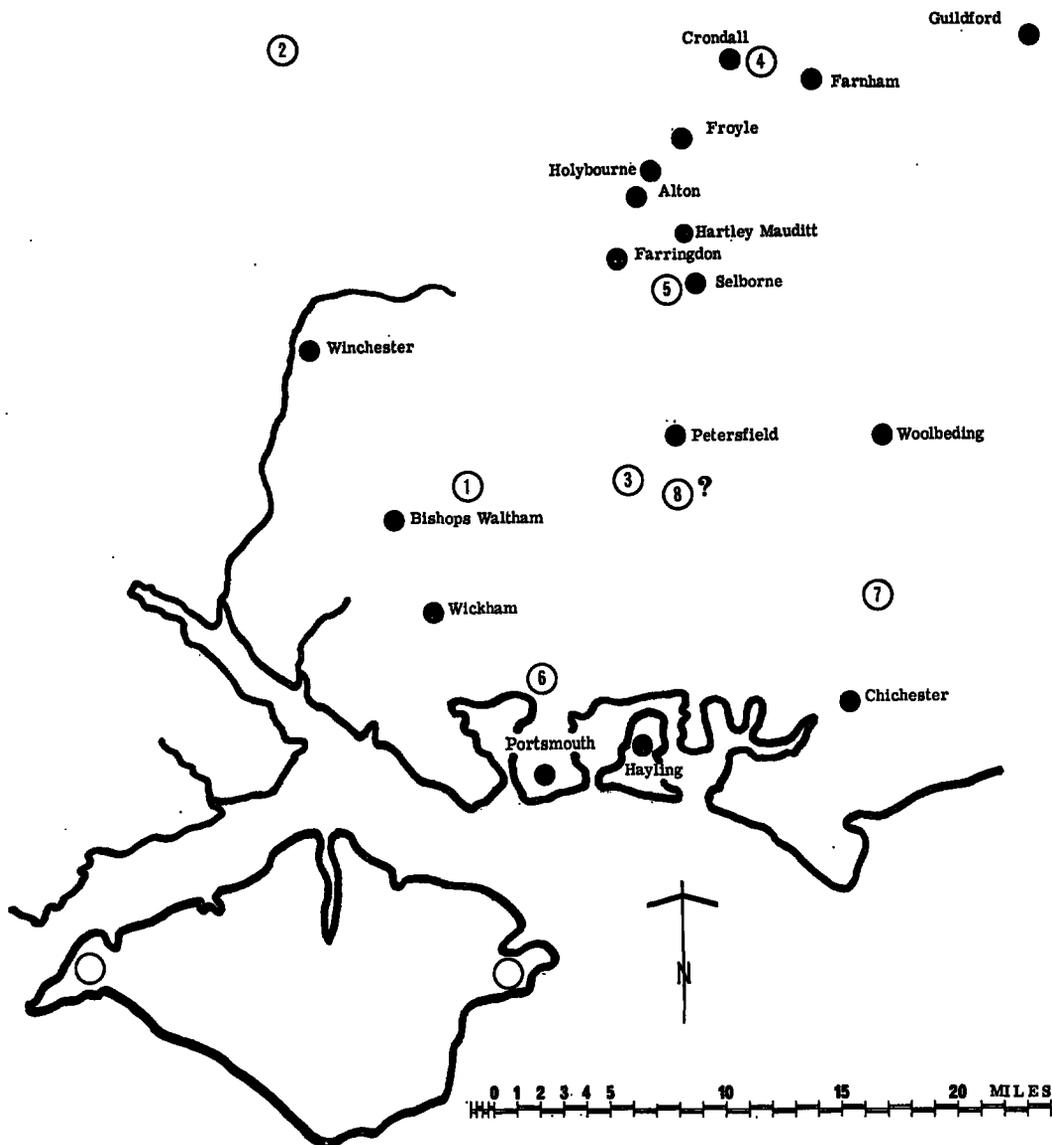


Fig. 33. Sketch map to illustrate the Hampshire beacon plot of 1586.
Sites of the beacons involved are shown by numbered circles as follows:

- | | |
|--------------|---|
| 1 Exton | 5 An unnamed site between Alton and Petersfield |
| 2 Whitchurch | 6 Portsdown |
| 3 Barnet | 7 St. Rook's Hill (The Trundle) |
| 4 Crondall | 8 Heydown (site uncertain) |

The two main beacon stations in the Isle of Wight, at the East and West Forelands, are shown by plain circles.

long.' 'I wold yt might,' replied Passenger, 'but how do you [know]?' 'Why,' said Hassall, 'do you not heare of yt? Noyse tolde me that ther wold be a rysing shortly to have [corn] or ellse to take yt wher yt was.' He went on to explain his loquacity by the fact that Mansell had assured him Passenger was in the secret.²¹ Yet, as we have seen, Passenger had been non-committal when approached by Mansell; and now, in this dialogue, William Silver represented another pair of ears and a possibly indiscreet tongue. Passenger himself was evidently surprised at the way the secret had spread: 'God's blood I had thought you had not knowen of yt.'²²

From about 1577²³ Richard Noyse had been a servant to Nicholas Tichborne of West Tisted,²⁴ the employment ending when in 1583 Tichborne was committed to gaol in Winchester for default of recusancy fines.²⁵ The demands on his estate increased when in the autumn of 1585 money was levied for fitting out horsemen for the Earl of Leicester's army in the Netherlands,²⁶ and Tichborne and his fellow recusants in gaol found themselves in real need. His present servant, Harry Merrytt of Priors Dean, approached Richard Noyse on about Monday, 16 May, with a request to deliver two bushels of wheat to Tichborne, and also to visit various well-disposed people – Mr. Hayes of Worldham, the godman Fielder of Wyck (Binsted), and Robert Lock of Binsted – 'and desire them to remember reliefe for the pore prisoners suche as he was being Recusantes'. Accordingly on Tuesday, 24 May, Noyse, carrying the wheat and the alms, and accompanied by Robert Hassall, set out from Hartley to Winchester; and the journey was the occasion of a further extension of the plot. Taking a circuitous route, they spent the night at the home of Noyse's brother Valentine at Wickham. Continuing their journey on the Wednesday, Valentine 'brought them on the waye till they came to Mr. Uvedall's parke',²⁷ and there he was let into the secret of the conspiracy. He agreed to be responsible for firing the beacons at Exton (fig. 33, no. 1), and Richard Noyse and Hassall continued on to Winchester, where Noyse delivered the wheat at Tichborne's house before taking on to the prison the four shillings that had been collected in answer to Tichborne's appeal.

So far, the plot had been confined to Hampshire apart from the tenuous connexion with the west country. With about a week to go, Mansell was able to involve Sussex. On the evening of Trinity Sunday, 29 May, 'in the highe way betwene Wardlowe and Hartley'²⁸ he met Henry Lockyer, a tailor from Woolbeding. 'After some speche had Mansell said that Corne was at an excessive price in that our countrie and that a greate many men were like to starve.' Extracting the usual promise of secrecy, he revealed the conspiracy. At this stage they were joined by Richard Noyse, who later described them as 'in great conference together'.²⁹ Calling Noyse over, and indicating Lockyer, Mansell said 'This man ys for our purpose . . . for he will bring us halfe a dozen calivers when the fireringe of the Beacons shalbe.' 'Yea by gods worde,' said Lockyer, 'that I will, and I will sett one Beacon on fire in Sussex myselfe, and yf neede be, I dare take up on me

²¹ 15, xiv.

²² 15, xii.

²³ 20, vii.

²⁴ *VCH. Hants*, iii, 61.

²⁵ J. E. Paul: *The Hampshire Recusants in the reign of Elizabeth I* (Southampton University Ph.D. thesis, 1958; unpublished), 353.

²⁶ Conyers Read; *Mr. Secretary Walsingham and the policy of Queen Elizabeth* (1925), ii, 298, footnote 2.

²⁷ 15, iii.

²⁸ 20, v.

²⁹ 15, ii.

to trayne one hundred men my selfe.' When pressed specifically to fire the beacons at St. Rook's Hill (the Trundle), Lockyer lost some of his vehemence and asked for time to think about it. Mansell agreed to call on him the following day, Friday, 3 June, for his answer. Lockyer now left them, but two days later, on Tuesday, 31 May, at Hartley south gate, he encountered William Mitchell who had been present at the first, fateful meeting with the man from the west country; and Mitchell now gave him more details of the conspiracy, naming names with abandon. They had intended to rise, he told Lockyer, ever since Christmas, 'if the wether had not been coulede & victuals shorte'.³⁰

On Wednesday morning the scene shifted to the alehouse at Farringdon. About nine o'clock Mansell and Hassall were there with William Faithful, a smith, and Robert Wolfe, a local mason, and the conversation was all about the plot. Wolfe was told about the planned rising on 6 June and was asked to fire the beacons on High Down.³¹ Yes, said Wolfe, if every man was up he would do as others did; and, with his horse, he could go on to another beacon and fire that too. Mansell, hopefully recruiting, asked whether he knew of any others who might help, and Wolfe suggested an Alton weaver called William Arthur. Later that morning there was a meeting at the same alehouse between Michael Hayward, a farm worker from Shete, Richard Noyse, and Hassall – who seems to have haunted the place; and there was talk of a possible rising. If there were a rising, Hayward hinted mysteriously, he knew one man who had a good store of money.³²

On Friday, 3 June, with only three days to go, it was clear that things were going wrong. William Stevens had not kept his appointment at the Whitsun holiday, and the stranger from the West country had failed to appear at Alton on the date arranged – Valentine Noyse had in fact been sent riding off to search for him. Now, on the Friday, Mansell methodically kept his promise to call on Lockyer at Woolbeding in Sussex, for his reply. Lockyer would have nothing more to do with the scheme. With surprising resilience and energy Mansell replied that he had a friend at Littleton 'who would doe somethinge for him therein',³³ and rode off to see him. Littleton was a further thirty miles from Woolbeding.

The next day was no more encouraging. On the Saturday morning Mansell was in Hartley with William Mitchell and William Musgrove, a tailor from Selborne, when he saw Richard Passenger who – although now quite well informed about the plot – had so far managed to avoid committing himself. Mansell opened the conversation by remarking that he hoped to see a beacon fired as it was about six years past³⁴ to the end that the people might be assembled together as they were then. Passenger replied that 'he liked not of it for what are poore men of them selves'; and Mansell reassured him that there were some of high calling that knew of it. Passenger remained evasive, and when he was asked to fire the beacons at Barnet (fig. 33, no. 3) he said that neither he nor his boy Jerome would do any such thing.³⁵ Understandably, Mansell later admitted that at this stage 'his hearte began to fayle . . . and ment to break of'.³⁶

³⁰ 20, v.

³¹ 15, x. The site of these beacons is uncertain.

³² 15, xii.

³³ 15, iv; 15, xv; 20, v.

³⁴ 1579, when some hunters trying to smoke a badger out of its earth caused the Portsdown beacon to be fired. *PHFC*, 10 (1931), 269, footnote 3.

³⁵ 15, xiv; 20, iii.

³⁶ 15, vi.

Sunday, 5 June, the eve of the plot, was a crucial day, and for Mansell it seems to have been a busy one. Early that morning he was seen in Mitchell's garden at Hartley talking to Geoffrey Carey, one of the conspirators.³⁷ Later that morning, with Mitchell and Hassall, he had dinner at Richard Noyse's house in Hartley, and after the meal the four of them withdrew to the back of the house. Mansell began by saying that he was afraid the matter would not go forward 'For that many hartes were afrayd'.³⁸ Noyse objected that he had enlisted various people and that 'he wold not for a xx℥ but yt shold goe forwarde', and on being pressed he named his employer, Lewknor Mills, as one of those he had told. The decision really rested with Mansell. 'My masters,' he said, 'I am the onelie man that began this and [since] it is begunne lett us followe yt for yf we doe not there is noe other waye but one for we shall die for it and therefore [let us go] forward withall.'³⁹ Mitchell agreed: 'We shall die for it, and therefore if wee can once gett them uppe and rise I will fyght for my liffe rather then be hanged'; and on this the four of them took their oath 'to stand to yt'.⁴⁰

With the vital decision now taken, Mansell applied himself with renewed energy to final preparations. Passenger's pessimism the previous day about the fate of a proletarian venture had received unwitting support from Geoffrey Carey in his conversation with Mansell that morning. Without in any way carping, Carey had asked Mansell 'who shold be theire Captaynes',⁴¹ and Mansell was compelled to admit that they had none. Carey helpfully brushed aside the difficulty with the remark that 'everie man wilbe a Captayn then'; but Mansell took the point seriously. If gentlemen were needed, he would find some. So, after the lunch-time conference at Noyse's house, Mansell and Mitchell set out for Mr. Rythe's estate at Norton⁴² 'to conferr & breake the matter unto one burbryge a gentellman borne & his kinsman' (i.e. Mansell's). Burbridge, having been called out from the house into a field, was told about the plot, and when he asked what its purpose was, he was assured that it was intended 'to pull downe the price of victualls and to suppress the sowynge of Oade'. On being further assured that there was 'nothyng intended agaynst the prynce' Burbridge expressed his pleasure at this and his willingness to join the venture. His solitary offering of a weapon was a 'welche hooke', but he promised that if he could find any other weapons he would hide them in the hedge at the back of his house.⁴³

As Mansell and Mitchell left Norton Farm with their mission accomplished, they were seen by William Musgrove 'betweene Selborne and Hartlie . . . cominge out of a lane to Mr. Rithes'⁴⁴ and they passed with a polite greeting. Farther on, almost at Priors Dean, Musgrove met Passenger riding from Selborne to East Meon and, continuing their conversation of the previous morning, 'they had some Comunicacon of this rysinge & fyringe of the beacons'. Musgrove cheerfully told Passenger that if that stir came to pass he (i.e. Passenger) would be accounted one of the chief of the company because he used his weapons. At that time, Musgrove continued, he would not be from his own house.⁴⁵

Meanwhile Mansell and Mitchell had returned to Hartley. Mansell went on home,

³⁷ 15, x.

³⁸ 15, vii.

³⁹ 15, i.

⁴⁰ 15, i; 15, xv; 20, ii.

⁴¹ 15, vii.

⁴² Norton Farm: see *VCH, Hants*, iii, 9.

⁴³ 15, vi; 15, xv.

⁴⁴ 15, xi.

⁴⁵ 15, xiv; 15, xv.

but Mitchell remained leaning on his gate and was soon rewarded by the sight of William Stevens, the Farringdon tailor, trying to go furtively past. Stevens, who had successfully managed to avoid the conspirators since his first meeting with Mansell and his vague commitment to fire the Whitchurch beacons, had been spending a quiet afternoon looking at some timber in Hartley Wood⁴⁶ and he had no plans now for a cosy chat with Mitchell.

Remorselessly Mitchell 'called him wthin his gate, and when he was wthin he asked hym howe chance he came not to Zacharie Mansell in the Whitson Hollie daies as he promised, and this examine said noe he would not meddle or make wth hym, and he' (i.e. Mitchell) 'asked whye we are poore men & reddie to starve because Corne is deare and we have great howsholdes of children; and this examine said he would not, for we [will] see yt all caste a waye, wife & children; and he' (Mitchell) 'said I have no worke to live upon and we shall die but once'.⁴⁷ Stevens departed, glad to end the interview, and Mitchell's next capture was Musgrove, passing through Hartley on his way home. Mitchell asked him to help in firing the beacons at Barnet⁴⁸ 'for that the Corne was soe deare that poore men could not live'; but Musgrove refused.⁴⁹

It is not clear at what time the descent on the beacons was planned. The calendar date was Monday, 6 June, but some of the depositions suggest that the time was the night of Sunday/Monday, though most of the evidence points to the night of Monday/Tuesday.⁵⁰ The events of that night cannot be reconstructed in detail, but two basic points are clear: all the beacon stations were found to be heavily guarded, and few if any of the conspirators were arrested on that night – presumably they were frightened away by the unusual deployment of troops. Eight beacons were affected (fig. 33): in Hampshire there were Exton, Whitchurch, Barnet, Crondall, a site between Alton and Petersfield, and Portsdown; and in Sussex the station at St. Rook's Hill usually known as the Trundle. A further Hampshire site, described variously as Heydone, Heydown or Haydowne⁵¹ cannot be firmly identified.

The conspirators had little idea why the plot had failed. Mansell himself merely remarked that 'by the watchinge of the Beacons or otherwise by gods providence it was prevented'.⁵² It would not have been surprising if the authorities had picked up some word of this conspiracy, which seems to have provided the material for alehouse gossip throughout the Meon valley and for miles around. There had been no shortage of indiscreet confidences. One of the worst offenders was Michael Hayward, who had been with some of the conspirators at the Farringdon alehouse on 1 June. Riding one day with John Bright of Hayling towards the beacons between Alton and Petersfield, he had said that within a month and less those beacons would be set on fire.⁵³ Again, he cancelled an arrangement with William Averie of Shete, to go up to London on 6 June, saying 'he wold see Mondaie past first for then shold be the firyng of the Beacons and then there wold be good done'.⁵⁴ Both Bright and Averie testified to the justices, and from the fact that there was no question of their arrest it can be presumed

⁴⁶ On the common rights in the 100-acre Hartley Wood, see *VCH, Hants*, ii, 510.

⁴⁷ 15, iv; 15, x.

⁴⁸ This site was Mitchell's particular responsibility, 15, vii.

⁴⁹ 15, xi.

⁵⁰ 20, iii; 15, vii; 15, viii; 15, xv.

⁵¹ 15, ii; 15, vii; 15, xv.

⁵² 15, vii; 15, viii.

⁵³ 15, xv; 20, viii.

⁵⁴ 15, xv.

that their evidence came in before 6 June. In fact, however, the fate of the plot had already been decided, by treachery. With a week to go, on Tuesday, 31 May, 'repentinge himself of the said pretended conspiracie', Richard Noyse sent his wife to her father John Dignall at Bishops Waltham, 'to will him that he woulde make manyfeste and bewraye the said pretended purposes'. Dignall was not at home when his daughter called, but she conveyed the message to her brother Henry.⁵⁵ By some irony, almost at the same moment Mitchell was telling Henry Lockyer, at Hartley, 'that he, Richard Noyse and Zacharie were all one'.⁵⁶ Noyse's motives are hard to determine, though the most plausible explanation seems to be that he felt some panic at the possible magnitude of the plot. The fact that he gave himself up to the Bishop of Winchester on Thursday, 9 June,⁵⁷ suggests that he had some confidence – unfounded, as it turned out – about his safety.

Once the machinery of the law was moving, it could not be stopped. Henry Dignall, confronted with this devastating information, informed his local constable, Thomas Cheverley.⁵⁸ It was these two who presented themselves at Beare, the home of Henry, Earl of Sussex, Lord Lieutenant of Hampshire, the following Saturday, 4 June. Sussex was making final preparations for his departure for London early the next day, and that journey was quickly abandoned. Further than that, he did not know what best to do. If he sent a formal message to the Privy Council about a conspiracy that turned out to be insignificant, he would look foolish. On the other hand if he took local action and put no report in to London the consequences could be serious. He compromised and wrote personally to the discreet Lord Treasurer Burghley to warn him of the alleged conspiracy. 'I have directed owt letters,' he went on, 'to the Justices of the peace in every division to prepare themselves and suche as be under ther chardge to be in a readynes to suppress and resist every attempt, and to take order that ther Beacons may be for a tyme well garded with some horsemen and footemen to th'ende no lewde persons sholde be able to attempt the fying of them uppon any sodayne wherby the countrey sholde be assembled or brought together: and also that the Constables and other honnest men may watch and have speciall care yf any such action sholde be conferred or talked of, and to informe the same.'⁵⁹ So writing, he hurried back to Portsmouth to begin his investigation; and as, over the following week, prisoners began to come in and depositions accumulate, he was quickly impressed by the dangerous possibilities they suggested. The first was the geographical spread of the conspiracy. Apart from the talk of a concerted rising as far west as Cornwall, there was the plan to fire St. Rook's Hill beacon in Sussex, and a report of 'xxtie good fellowes working in a parke, that . . . did looke for suche a day' also in Sussex.⁶⁰ One of the suspects, Robert Elkyngs, described as 'a Carpenter and a mynstrell',⁶¹ said he had heard his father-in-law 'tell of some stirre that was in the Isle of Weight about cartaine Shippes that were seene at the sea'.⁶² The Earle of Sussex, scenting a regional uprising, lost no time in warning the neighbouring Lords-Lieutenant.⁶³ On Tuesday, 7 June, he wrote to Sir George Carey, Captain of the Isle of Wight, who replied the next day in a

⁵⁵ 20, vii; 15, ii.

⁵⁶ 20, v.

⁵⁷ 15, xv; 20, vii.

⁵⁸ 20, viii.

⁵⁹ Brit. Mus. mss. Lansdowne 50, no. 19.

⁶⁰ 15, xii.

⁶¹ 15, xv.

⁶² 15, ix.

⁶³ Brit. Mus. mss. Lansdowne, 50, no. 20, Earl of Sussex to Lord Burghley, 13 June 1586.

sarcastic tone: 'That . . . whereupon any Speech should grow, that they which had not among them, to his Knowledge a discontented Person, were up in Arms, and yesterday a Field to be pitched, he could not guess; unless they should turn to a seditious Jest, or being in Arms, because he (the Governour) daily mustred and trained the People. And of pitching a Field, in respect that Yesterday (added he) divers Gentlemen accompanied me to hunt Ducks at Nettleston Pond; where in the Battel 200 were killed.'⁶⁴ Carey did however concede the point about putting a particularly close watch on the beacons.

Some of the evidence, in particular the confessions of Passenger and Hassall, gave even more cause for anxiety. A connecting thread of recusancy began to appear. Passenger deposed that 'as he cold gather the begyninge of these practises came from West Tisted where one Mr. Nicholas Tychborne doth dwell'.⁶⁵ Moreover he claimed to have been told by Hassall that there were 'some in that howse that wolde geve a C \mathcal{L} that this rysing might go forwarde'.⁶⁶ The naming of such a leading recusant family must have caused the Earl of Sussex to doubt whether he was dealing with a mere food riot by a crowd of starving cloth-workers. There had been threats of action, too, against the Bishop of Winchester, Thomas Cooper. Lockyer was alleged to have promised to 'pull the bishoppe of Wynchester owt of Wolsey'. Lockyer on the other hand said that Richard Noyse had announced his intention 'first to go to Wynchester and fetche their frendes owt of durance especiallie one his dere Mr. Mr. Nicholas Tycheborne and his Friendes. Then to [take] the Bishoppe and cutt of his heade.'⁶⁷ Another witness claimed to have heard Noyse say 'that he doubted not but within this moneth to have Masse agayne in Englande'.⁶⁸ Lockyer said that he had heard Mansell naming a day 'when they shold have all the hyer Powers at London and then shold they have all thynges as they wold themselves'.⁶⁹ There was the occasional hint of help from abroad. Hassall had been heard to remark that 'the Frenchmen weare upon the Coaste, and that the Shippes were seene at Portsmouth', to which Mitchell had replied: 'I wold they were com indeede for then we shold have [stirre] and then there wold be some good to be done for poore men.'⁷⁰ Hassall himself deposed that the reference had been to 'Shippes of kynge Phillippe'.⁷¹ At some stage in the preliminary questioning, someone testified that Mansell had been told 'that the Spaniardes had had an overthrowe in Flanders', to which Mansell replied: 'It makes no matter wee shall make shifte good enoughe amongst our selves.'⁷²

On Monday, 13 June, a week after the date for the abortive plot, the Earl of Sussex wrote to Burghley: 'I thanck god that it was my channce to stay two or three daies longer, there I was determynd, for I fynde by the sequell of the matter (as some terme it) there wolde have bene a black or bloody day in Englande, wch (I hope) by this means of discoverye and foresight ys prevented . . . I have diverse of the conspirators and ther confederats taken, of whom some be examyned, and some not, for that they be brought in howlerly.'⁷³

⁶⁴ John Strype: *Annals of the Reformation* . . . (2nd edition, vol. 3 (1728), 392).

⁶⁵ 15, xv. On this family, see J. E. Paul, *op. cit.*, 353.

⁶⁶ 15, xiv.

⁶⁷ 15, xv.

⁶⁸ 15, xiv.

⁶⁹ 15, xv.

⁷⁰ 15, ii.

⁷¹ 15, xv.

⁷² 20, ii.

⁷³ MSS. Lans., 50, no. 20.

The impact of this news in London was considerable. For some time now Walsingham had been watching each development of the Babington Plot, and it must have been disconcerting for him to be caught in the flank by what seemed to be an extensive recusant conspiracy of which he had known nothing. Every precaution was now taken. On Thursday, 16 June, a seminary priest, apparently recently in Hampshire, Martin Ara, alias Cotton, was interrogated before a justice of the peace in London. He deposed that 'he heard no Bruits or Reports in his Journey, save that the poorer Sort were ready to break down Barnes to get Corn. And denyeth, that he heard any thing of the firing of the Beacons, or of any Ships coming on the Seas.'⁷⁴ By Monday, 11 July, the first batch of evidence had been considered by Thomas Egerton, the Solicitor-General, who was reporting directly to Walsingham. Six of the chief conspirators – Richard Noyse, Hassall, Passenger, Lockyer, Mansell, and Hayward – were taken up to London for further questioning on some of the points that the government regarded as the most menacing: what captains or leaders had they? What was the source of their weapons and provisions? What prisons had they planned to break open? Would they have resisted the Queen's officers? 'Whither had they or any of them any mynde, or purposse to change the state, or government of the Realme, or to make any alteracon of Religion?'⁷⁵ Meanwhile at Portsmouth the Earl of Sussex was gathering his own information about the activities of the local recusants. By 13 June he had obtained news that several Roman Catholic families had chartered a ship to take them abroad; and he had two ships lying in ambush for them rather than attempt to take the fugitives by land, 'for such people be overmuch frynded upon this sea Coast'.⁷⁶

During July Walsingham's skilled interrogators continued their examination of the Hampshire conspiracy, and by 19 July they were able to summarise their conclusions: 'The pretence of the conspirators was first to have fired the Beacons, by that meanes to have assembled the people together, whereby they might have weapons put into their handes. Then to have redressed the present dearth of Corne and to have put downe the sowinge of Oade, also they purposed to have robbed divers gentlemens houses in the stir and to have put down Sr Richard Nortons houses'⁷⁷ and so to have gone to Wynchester, and lett the recusants out of prison, and then to have [] the bishoppe out of Wolsey whom they [] slaine, wth diverse other priestes and gentlemen whom the [] thynke meete to be put downe'.⁷⁸ As far as Walsingham was concerned the incident was now closed, and he could give his undivided attention to the Babington affair and the Queen of Scots.

Whatever adventitious recusant overtones the conspiracy had acquired, its basic motivation was clearly a reaction against high bread prices, and it remains to be asked whether such agitation was justified, and whether it achieved any long-term result. Certainly the harvest years 1585 and 1586 saw a bad corn yield throughout Europe, and in England the position was aggravated by government wheat purchases for the armed forces.⁷⁹ The period of the Hampshire plot, in May and June, understandably

⁷⁴ Strype, *op. cit.*, 2nd ed. (1728), Appendix to vol. 3, book 2, 153. I am indebted, for this reference, to Dr. Paul's thesis, *op. cit.*, 98–99.

⁷⁵ 20, 1.

⁷⁶ MSS. Lans., 50, no. 21, Sussex to Burghley.

⁷⁷ Of East Tisted: *VCH, Hants*, iii, 31.

⁷⁸ 20, ix.

⁷⁹ B. Pearce: 'Elizabethan food policy and the armed forces' (*EcHR* 12 (1942), 39–40).

coincided with the period in the annual price cycle when corn prices were in any case at their highest, before the new harvest. The prices complained of – 5s. a bushel in Dorset, 6s. in Cornwall, and 8s. in Bristol – were indeed very high but by no means unparalleled at that time. Tables showing the average annual wheat prices for England indicate the speed of the price rise – 299 points for the harvest year 1584, 427 points for 1585, and 626 for 1586, a level exceeded during the rest of the reign only by the notorious years 1595–97.⁸⁰ Moreover the averages for western Europe show even more severe prices – 598 points for the harvest year 1585, and 904 points for 1586. On the Paris grain market, for which detailed records exist, wheat prices climbed steadily during the early part of 1586; and about the middle of May – when the Hampshire conspiracy was beginning – reached a maximum of 10s. 8d. a bushel.⁸¹ The prices on the Orleans market about this time were not far behind.⁸² Within England there were admittedly some regional price variations. At the Isle of Wight market in June 1586 wheat was selling at between 4s. and 4s. 3d. per bushel,⁸³ and at Oxford market in March it was 4s. 2d. a bushel.⁸⁴ In London it climbed from 3s. 1½d. in the spring to 5s. by the end of 1586⁸⁵, but in Exeter 5s. was the average price for the year.⁸⁶ During June and July 1586, when the Privy Council was urgently checking on the level of prices in various counties, wheat was reported to range from 2s. 8d. at Ely to 3s. 4d. in Nottinghamshire, but in Herefordshire the best wheat was selling at prices up to 7s. a bushel.⁸⁷ An assessment of recommended maximum prices, dated December 1586 among the Burghley papers, suggests that best wheat should not sell at above 4s., and the second quality at 3s. 4d.⁸⁸ The practical background to all these prices is that a farm labourer at this time earned 8d. a day.⁸⁹

Of course there was strong public reaction to the prices. A dispatch from the Spanish embassy in Paris in the late summer of 1585 reports a colourful story that a grain ship waiting in the Severn to sail to Holland had been ‘hacked to pieces by 500 men, who had risen with that object’⁹⁰ and it went on to claim that only the arrival of six ships from Denmark with cargoes of grain had prevented a famine. A more reliable indication of the acute corn shortage is to be found in the evident concern shown by the government. Even before the Hampshire plot came to light, the Council had been putting out anxious inquiries about market prices in different parts of the country; but on 19 June – by which time Burghley would have received Sussex’s doom-laden letter

⁸⁰ Joan Thirsk (ed.): *The agrarian history of England and Wales*, vol. iv, 1500–1640 (Cambridge, 1967), 854. The annual average for 1450–99 is there taken as being 100 points.

⁸¹ Micheline Baulant and Jean Meuvret: *Prix des Céréales de la Mercerie de Paris (1520–1698)*, Tome I (Paris) 1960, 220. The wheat maximum on 17 May 1586 is given as 19.50 livres tournois to the setier, and in converting to English measures and prices I have taken the setier to be the equivalent of 1.56 hectolitres (Baulant and Meuvret, *op. cit.*, 18), i.e. 4.29 bushels; and the 1586 ratio of the livre tournois to the pound sterling as 12 to 102 respectively (E. E. Rich and C. H. Wilson (eds.): *Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, vol. iv (Cambridge 1967), 458, fig. 4.

⁸² Georg Wiebe: *Zur Geschichte der Preisrevolution des*

16 und 17 Jahrhunderts (Staats- und socialwissenschaftliche Beiträge) ii, part 2 (Leipzig 1895), 363.

⁸³ John Strype, *op. cit.*, 391.

⁸⁴ James E. Thorold Rogers: *A history of agriculture and prices in England*, vol. vi (Oxford 1887), 6.

⁸⁵ J. D. Gould: *The crisis in the export trade, 1586–1587*, in *EHR* 71 (1956), 215.

⁸⁶ B. R. Mitchell and Phyllis Deane: *Abstract of British historical statistics* (Cambridge 1962), 486.

⁸⁷ *PRO SP.12/190/19 and 14; SP.12/191/2.*

⁸⁸ *Mss. Lans.*, 48, no. 56.

⁸⁹ Thorold Rogers, *op. cit.*, 616.

⁹⁰ Martin A. S. Hume (ed.): *Calendar of Letters and State Papers relating to English affairs, preserved principally in the Archives of Simancas*, vol. iii, Elizabeth, 1580–1586 (1896), p. (5)44, item 403.

of 13 June about the gravity of the plot – the Council took the drastic action of requisitioning a cargo of wheat and rye recently arrived at Southampton ‘out of the East Countreyes’, and intended by Richard Goddard, the Southampton merchant who owned it, for reshipment to France.⁹¹ When the situation was later aggravated by the bad harvest of 1586 the government’s concern intensified, as can be seen from the number of Burghley’s manuscript minutes on the subject during December, culminating in the Queen’s proclamation of 2 January, 1587, controlling prices.⁹² Burghley obviously felt that the scarcity was made unnecessarily acute by hoarding and profiteering. One of his drafts referred to ‘the generall dearth growne of Corne, and other victualls, partlie thorowghe the unseasonableness of the yere paste, wherebie want hath growne more in somme Cuntries than in others: but most of all generally thorowghe the Covetnousnes, and uncharitable greedines of such as be great Cornemaisters’.⁹³ On 27 December, 1586, he drafted an order to sheriffs and justices to inquire through juries ‘what number of persons everye housholder that hath Corne in their barns, stables or otherwher, & what grain prices they have charged to people’.⁹⁴ One senses that if Mansell and his friends had broken a few barns open, Burghley might have had a sneaking sympathy for them.

There was a further economic point that had a special bearing on the Hampshire plot. This was the fact that the period of corn scarcity coincided with a major disruption of international trade resulting from the capture by Parma in 1585 of the great entrepot of Antwerp. This immediately hit English cloth export trade, causing it to feel out for fresh market areas such as the Mediterranean.⁹⁵ In 1586, before such adjustments could be made, there are unmistakable signs of recession in almost every sector of the clothing industry. There is a significant dip in the annual average of Durham wool prices, from 5.40 shillings a stone in 1584, to 4.75 in 1585, and 3.94 in 1586, thenceforth climbing steadily to 7.18 in 1590.⁹⁶ In a time of mounting food prices, cloth prices were at best static. In the Winchester College series quoted by Beveridge, cloth remained steady at 83 shillings a piece during the harvest years 1581–1586, climbing only in the 1590s.⁹⁷ The clothing industry was a sensitive sector of the economy perhaps analagous to the motor industry today; and the government in 1586 was alert to the special hardships produced by the coincidence of the trade recession and the dearth of corn. On 6 May, about the time of the inception of the Hampshire plot, the Council wrote to the sheriff and justices of Somerset ‘that wheras their Lordships are informed that the poorer sorte of the people inhabiting about the cittie of Bathe and other townes on the easterlie

⁹¹ J. R. Dasent (ed.): *Acts of the Privy Council* (New Series), vol. xiv (1586–1587), 155. The embargo on foreign re-export was qualified by a suggestion that Goddard ‘discharg and vent it at Bristol or at some other place therabouts, where it is thought he maye make as good a reckoning therof as if he should have carried it into Fraunce’. Given the high Paris prices quoted above, this serves to confirm the reported level of 8s. a bushel at Bristol quoted to Mansell by the man from the West Country.

⁹² Robert Steele (ed.): *Bibliotheca Lindesiana*, vol. v, a bibliography of Royal Proclamations of the Tudor and Stuart Sovereigns . . . 1485–1714; vol. i: England and Wales (Oxford 1910), no. 791.

⁹³ mss. Lans., 48, no. 55.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 48, no. 54.

⁹⁵ Ralph Davis: ‘England and the Mediterranean 1570–1670’, in F. J. Fisher (ed.): *Essays in the economic and social history of Tudor and Stuart England* (Cambridge 1961), 118.

⁹⁶ Peter J. Bowden: ‘Movements in wool prices, 1490–1610’, in *Yorkshire Bulletin of Economic and Social Research*, 4 (September 1952), 115.

⁹⁷ Sir William Beveridge: *Prices and Wages in England from the twelfth to the nineteenth century*, vol. i (1939), 87.

partes of the countie of Somerset, wont to live by spinning, carding and workeing of wolle, are not set on worke, wherby in this tyme of dearthe of corne and victuall they lack their comon and necessarie foode, a matter not onlie full of pittie in respect of the people but of dangerous consequence to the State if speedie order be not taken therein; her Majestie therefore tending the one and careful of th'other, hathe geven commandement that they forthwith upon the receipt hereof assembling themselves together, shall consider of the present inconvenience and how it maie be redressed, and for that purpose especiallie they are hereby authorised to call before them the clothiers and other men of trade in the severall places within the said countie where the people doe complaine of lack of worke, and in her Majesties name to require and command such of them as have stockes and are of habillitie to employe the same as they have heertofore don, so as by them the poore maie be set on worke.'⁹⁸ Well might the Council thus combine humanitarianism and self-interest. F. J. Fisher has commented on the disconcerting results of unemployment in the Tudor textile industry: 'It was found that whenever trade fell off: "infinite numbers of Spynners, Carders, Pickers of woll are turned to begging with no smale store of pore children, who driven with necessitie (that hath no lawe) both come idelic abowt to begg to the oppression of the poore husbandmen . . . and robb barnes in the winter tyme''.'⁹⁹ It is hardly surprising, then, that so many weavers and tailors should be found among the Hampshire plotters; and their depositions reveal something of the desperation they felt – especially the tailor Mitchell, who declared 'that he wolde fight for his life & that he woulde not dye like a dogg & starve for want of victualls.'¹⁰⁰ Of the three leaders of the woad-sowing riot at Romsey early in May, one again was a tailor.¹⁰¹

Just as recusancy seems to have been no more than a tenuous link in the Hampshire plot, the sowing of woad was again little more than the immediate irritant that gave proximate and identifiable form to the economic pressures driving the conspirators. The use of good arable land for a luxury cash crop at a time of dearth was a visible affront, about which something could be done. From 1585 the privateering war with Spain had interrupted English imports from such traditional places as the Azores, and an attempt had been made to make up the supply by domestic planting. During 1585 there was the usual succession of government papers culminating in a royal proclamation of 14 October, 1585, controlling and limiting the sowing of woad.¹⁰² It is clear from a letter of Walsingham's to Burghley on 6 April that the immediate pressure for this measure was coming personally from the Queen.¹⁰³ The official objections to woad-sowing were, firstly, that the Queen thereby suffered a loss of income from customs duties; and secondly, that a few seasons under woad was thought to make the best arable and pasture land barren. Ironically for the raw material of a textile dye, the crop was also thought to have a damaging effect on the clothing industry, 'for that the poorer sorte of people accustomed to live by their travaill in spinning of wolle for clothing are (at) the Cheifest and principall times of the yeere when ther labour is

⁹⁸ J. R. Dasent, *op. cit.*, 93.

⁹⁹ F. J. Fisher: 'Commercial trends and policy in 16th-century England', *ECHR* 10 (November 1940), 111 (quoting the Bodleian Rawlinson MSS., D., 133, f. 4b).

¹⁰⁰ SP.12/191/20, iii.

¹⁰¹ SP.12/189/15.

¹⁰² Robert Steele (ed.), *op. cit.*, no. 782.

¹⁰³ MSS. Lans., 45, no. 30.

most required of the Clothiers, hired and sett on worke by the Oaders, wherby also there groweth a hindrance to clothing and so a diminution of her Mat^{tes} Custome uppon clothe.¹⁰⁴ By 1586 woad cultivation was controlled and under licence. The Romsey riot in May was in protest against the sowing of 25 acres (and plans to sow up to 35 more) apparently without licence. As far as Mansell and his friends were concerned, even the licenced quota was an offence at a time of dearth.

In view of the severe food shortage, then, there was obviously real provocation to start the Hampshire beacon plot. Its effect on the Privy Council members is hard to assess – for it never reached the official Council agenda. Within a month of its discovery, Walsingham and Burghley were entirely occupied once more with the Babington plot and the payment of Leicester's army in the Netherlands, respectively. The government was keenly aware of the general distress, and palliative measures were in progress before the plot was discovered. It is at least arguable that the desperate remedy chosen by Mansell and his friends helped to pave the way for the corn price legislation at the end of the year, but the Privy Council already had plenty of evidence that hardship existed. Bearing in mind the point that high wheat prices cannot always be uncritically equated with general hunger,¹⁰⁵ the extent of popular distress in 1586 is indicated by the urgent concern shown by the Council.

As for the fate of the conspirators, it seems likely that they were released from the Marshalsea prison in April 1587.¹⁰⁶ Of the lesser conspirators who were committed to Winchester gaol, Valentine Noyse is to be found there again in 1599 – this time as one of the under-keepers, at the time when a priest escaped.¹⁰⁷ Noyse would appear to have given up farm work for an occupation that allowed more flamboyant gestures against authority.

ABBREVIATIONS USED

- APC Acts of the Privy Council.
 EHR English Historical Review.
 EcHR Economic History Review.
 PHFC Proceedings of the Hampshire Field Club and Archaeological Society.
 PRO Public Record Office.
 VCH Victoria County History.

In printed works cited, the place of publication is London, unless otherwise stated. Uncertain readings are given in brackets.

¹⁰⁴ MSS. Lans., 49, no. 34 (renumbered as 2).

¹⁰⁵ Peter Ramsay: *Tudor economic problems* (1963),

¹⁰⁶ PHFC, 12 (1932), 60.

¹⁰⁷ J. E. Paul thesis, *op. cit.*, 240.