



# EDWARD DE VERE NEWSLETTER NO. 26

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## **Does the unusual orthography of the Langham Letter indicate that the author was one of the proponents of spelling reform in the 1570's?**

The orthography of the Langham *Letter* is one of its most noticeable features. The unorthodox spelling was once thought to represent a Warwickshire or Northamptonshire dialect; however, this view is now generally discredited, and the orthography of the *Letter* is recognized as being a variant of the spelling reform systems which enjoyed a certain degree of popularity in the 16th century.

Among the more prominent spelling reformers were Sir John Cheke (1514-1557), tutor to Edward VI and first Regius Professor of Greek at Cambridge, and the scholar and statesman Sir Thomas Smith (1513-1577). Other spelling reformers of the period included John Hart (d.1574), William Bullokar (1530?-1609), Richard Mulcaster (1530?-1611) and Alexander Gil (1565-1635) (Dobson, v.1, 38-155).

According to Dobson, attempts to reform English spelling began while Cheke and Smith were teaching at Cambridge. In the course of their lectures, Cheke and Smith introduced a new method of pronunciation of Greek based on Erasmus's view of the manner in which the language would have been pronounced at the time the Greek classics were written. This innovative teaching method was brought to an abrupt halt in 1542 when Stephen Gardiner, Bishop of Winchester and Chancellor of the University of Cambridge, issued a decree forbidding the use of the new pronunciation (Dobson, v.1, 38-9).

The reform of Greek pronunciation seems to have led both Cheke and Smith naturally to the reform of English pronunciation, the problems of Greek translation having doubtless caused them to consider more closely the relationship between English pronunciation and spelling. Cheke published no theoretical exposition of his ideas on English spelling reform, although he put them to practical use in his translation of the Gospel of St. Matthew (Dobson, v.1, 43). Smith, however, explained his theories of English spelling reform fully in his *De recta & emendata linguae anglicae scriptione, Dialogus*, written about 1566. In Dobson's view, this work "remains one of the most important sources for our knowledge of sixteenth-century pronunciation" (v.1, 62).

Of the other spelling reformers of the 16th century, the most important was John Hart. Although biographical information about Hart is sketchy, it is thought that he was the son of Thomas Hart of Devonshire and that his brother Robert was a London merchant living in Cornhill. Hart entered the College of Heralds while still young, and was Chester Herald in 1566. He wrote three works on spelling reform: *The opening of the unreasonable writing of our english toung* of 1551, dedicated to Edward VI; the *Orthographie* of 1569; and *A Methode or comfortable beginning for all unlearned*. . . of 1570 (Dobson, v.1, 63-5; v.2, 1023-1032).

Dobson has high praise for Hart's abilities:

[H]e can certainly be accorded the praise of being far and away the best sixteenth-century phonetician,

whose work in certain respects was not surpassed by the more systematic writers of the next century. The excellence of his analysis of speech and his understanding of phonetic method, the general adequacy of his system of spelling, and the extent of his transcriptions make him our chief authority for the pronunciation of his time (v.1, 88).

The orthography of the Langham *Letter* bears a close relationship to the early efforts at spelling reform by Cheke, Smith and Hart. According to Dobson, who has analysed the *Letter's* orthography in some detail, Langham's spelling agrees closely with that of the "more academic" reformers, although it is "more expressive than Cheke's spelling" (v.1, 93). Thus, although the whole problem is naturally a very complex one, it can be said that the spelling in the Langham *Letter* is in general conformity with the work of Cheke, Smith and Hart.

The particular variant of the reforming system found in the Langham *Letter* is found in six other Elizabethan works. Four of these are attributed to William Patten: *Calendar of Scripture* (1575), *A moorning ditti upon . . . Henry, Earl of Arundel* (1580), *Deus Iudicium* (1583) and *Domine in virtute* (1598). Two other works which make use of the system are John Cornet's *Admonition to Doctor Story* (1575?) and Leonard Stavelly's *A brief discourse* (1579?). Four of these publications (*A moorning ditti*, *Deus Iudicium*, *Domine in virtute* and *Admonition to Doctor Story*) are broadsides, and the seven titles were published by four different printers: John Allde, Thomas Purfoot, R. Jugge and Abel Jeffes (Kuin 22).

The foregoing discussion leads to a consideration of the author's reason for using a spelling reform system in the *Letter*. As Kuin notes, a consideration of problems of spelling reform would normally "be limited to someone with a special, if personal, interest in language and/or literature" (31). This point is important to the question of the authorship of the Langham *Letter*, since it is difficult to envisage Robert Langham, Keeper of the Council Chamber, having the specialized interest in language and literature which would have led him to use -- much less devise a variant of -- a reformed system of English spelling. In this context, it is also significant that the Langham *Letter* is, so far as is known, Robert

Langham's sole literary production. An individual unaccustomed to sustained creative writing can only with the greatest difficulty be imagined as engaging in the writing of a 17,000-word prose piece and, at the same time, employing in its composition a novel spelling system. Yet one of the features Kuin and other critics have remarked in the Langham *Letter* is its "immediacy". The *Letter's* "verve" and its "racy, colloquial prose" (Kuin 16) suggest that the writing of a lengthy piece using an innovative spelling system was almost effortless for its author. The Langham *Letter* gives not the slightest indication of being a laboured production, and is, without question, the work of a very practiced writer. None of this is consistent with the *Letter's* having been written by Robert Langham, Clerk of the Council Chamber.

Edward de Vere, on the other hand, had, by the date of the Langham *Letter*, spent almost two decades in the intensive reading and study which enabled him to acquire two Master of Arts degrees. His pronounced literary tastes were well known to his contemporaries, and he can easily be conceived of as being interested in spelling reform. Moreover, Oxford's documented connections with Cheke, Smith and Hart make it virtually certain that he would have known of their orthographic reforms. Sir John Cheke was the brother of Oxford's father-in-law, Lord Burghley's first wife, Mary Cheke (mother of Burghley's son Thomas Cecil). Sir Thomas Smith was one of Oxford's earliest tutors (Ward 10-1). John Hart, *Chester Herald*, was a dependent of Burghley's from 1561 on, and an official in the Court of Wards, of which Burghley was Master (Dobson, v.2, 1030-1). (The relationship between Burghley and John Hart can perhaps even be explained by the fact that Burghley's close friend, William Brooke, Lord Cobham was related to the Hart family: Lord Cobham's grandfather, Thomas Brooke (d.1529), married, as his third wife, Elizabeth Hart, and Cobham's aunt, Frideswide Braye, was married to Sir Percival Hart (1496-1580) of Lullingstone, Kent.) (McKeen 68, 145, 304, 701, 749). An old account book is still extant which lists sums of money paid on behalf of the royal wards; one section, headed "Payments made by John Hart, Ches-

ter Herald, on behalf of the Earl of Oxford from January 1 to September 30, 1569/70", records payments made by Hart for the nineteen-year old Earl's clothing, shoes, linen, books, weapons and other articles (Ward 32-3). There are other intriguing, but as yet unexplored, connections between Oxford and the Harts: Oxford's sister married, as her second husband, Sir Eustace Hart (Dobson, v.2, 1027), and Oxford sold his mansion at London Stone in 1589 to alderman Sir John Hart (Ward 49).

As the foregoing indicates, there is every likelihood that Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, was acquainted with the work of the early spelling reformers. Given his omniverous interest in learning, it is also highly probable that he would have been curious enough to experiment with the spelling reform system introduced by Cheke, Smith and Hart, and modify it to suit his own purposes. The *Langham Letter* appears to be the product of that interest and experimentation, and the spelling reform system used in its composition is one of the strongest evidences of Oxford's authorship of the *Letter*.

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