

An Inquest of 1566

The Registra Dimissiones ad Firmam in the college archives comprise thirty large and very heavy volumes dating from 1480 to 1835, recording for the most part, and in great detail, this college's many leases of property. Volume 5 (1562-1585) contains 242 folio leaves of parchment, closely written in hands of varying legibility and in the normal run of things providing little by way of mystery or adventure for the reader. With one strange exception: folios 25-28 are given over to the depositions made to a coroner's inquest and the college fellows' deliberations on the unhappy events of January 1566 when one of their number, John Plankney, aged twenty-five and studying civil law, was found drowned near Osney Bridge after his boots and cloak had been found abandoned over two hundred yards away, at Rewley Lock.

The case was wreathed in mystery from the outset, since nobody in college had seen Plankney since Christmas Eve when he left to go to his father's house in London. On 'the Friday after Twelfdaye' (11 January) however his father came to Oxford, looking for his son who was supposed to have returned to college to seek permission for a month's sick-leave. On St John's day (27 December) 'a cloke, a paire of bootes and a hanger' (the fringed loop or strap in which a small sword or dagger would be hung from a belt) had been found at Rewley Lock 'agaynst the place where they go in to swym', but no sign of the young man. The body was found near Osney Bridge over a month later, on Candlemas Eve (1 February); he was wearing a shirt, short trunk hose and nether-hose, leather shoes and gloves, and inside his trunk-hose was stowed a clean shirt wrapped or folded up 'laundress-wise'. Round his neck hung a metal crucifix, and from his belt hung a pouch containing coins and two gaming dice. (So much for the Founder's statutes prohibiting the carrying of weapons or gambling with dice.)

The coroner asked twenty-six questions of the inquest jury and others who came forward with witness statements. In an effort to try to establish how long the young man had been dead, many of the questions ranged from 'when and where did you last see him' to a whole barrage of questions about the state of the corpse, its clothing and goods, when found. Also, in passages reminiscent of Sherlock Holmes's fixation with how far the parsley had sunk into the butter, there was much discussion about how far the water had penetrated through the padding of the trunk-hose and into the clean shirt that one witness said Plankney had just collected from the laundress when he left college on Christmas Eve.

According to the Lease book, the coroner took depositions from twenty-eight people: five Oxford jurymen, the four townsmen who pulled Plankney's body from the water and the two women who prepared it for burial, two kitchen staff and the owner of White Hall in whose grounds by Rewley Lock the missing student's cloak and boots had been found, five passers-by, and nine New College men who had known Plankney. Needless to say, their depositions do not tally in all respects, and the coroner may have regretted asking some of the questions. It was quite clear that townsmen in shock, or with poor eyesight, or (as one admitted) who simply watched from a distance, could not agree on the state of the body, or even how much money was in Plankney's purse (one said 11s. 6d., another said 6s. 6d.) although they all agreed about the two gaming dice. Some of the deponents gave evidence that was simply bizarre: Elizabeth Parsons, one of the winding women who shrouded Plankney, noted that his face was 'mangled with fishes as she thinketh', which was surely an optimistic view of the contents of the polluted river, and that the corpse 'did stinke very much'; her colleague Agnes Smith, on the other hand, thought otherwise on both counts. Someone who was not even there, John Wellburne, made an astonishing statement that 'he had heard one Pykover say that he saw the man leping over the gutter going oute at Northgat with his hanger and his bootes upon his shoulders and a cap case, as he thinketh ... the man was not well in his mynd', but when Pykover was found and examined he said he never saw any such thing and did not know anything of Plankney. New College fellow Michael Maschart (who went on to become vicar of Writtle and author of *Poemata varia*, a volume of secular poems) stated that one Mr Smith of Christ Church had told him that Plankney's father was anxious about

him because they had ‘exchanged harsh words when they parted in London’ after the young man had announced that he was too ill to return to Oxford, and added that Plankney senior had told Maschart that he had forced his son to return as he knew he had to apply for a ‘cause’ (licence to be absent), ‘to which the said John Plankney answered, weeping, “Father, I think then, that ye shall see me no more”’. Several deponents from the college agreed that when Plankney senior came to New College looking for his son, his immediate reaction was that his son ‘had cast himself away, but if he died like an honest man he would not care’. Another fellow, Richard Warneford, testified that Plankney had suffered from violent headaches a fortnight before Christmas and that although ‘he dyd call him divers tymes to play with him at tennece’ Plankney always refused, although he ‘did talk as reasonably as he was wont to do’.

Plankney’s closest friend in college, John Munden (a staunch catholic who would shortly flee to Europe as a result of Bishop Horne’s visitation, and would end up years later captured by Walsingham’s men and executed at Tyburn), averred that Plankney had been in debt the previous August but had received money from his father since then; and another fellow, John Chaundler, confirmed that he had handed over 33s. 4d. to Plankney just before Christmas and had a receipt to prove it. Munden also noted that Plankney ‘dyd counterfayte sycknesse’ in order to get leave from college, although he did concede that Plankney ‘was not as mery at any tyme as he was wont to be’. This view was shared by Thomas Geffrey and William Reynolds, who shared Plankneys’ set of rooms in college. Both commented that before Christmas Plankney had ‘kept his chamber’ and ‘did not play his lute as much as he used to’, but Reynolds’s evidence proved of little further value since he said he had nothing in common with either of his chamber-fellows and spent no time with them.

Confusing evidence was given by the kitchen staff of White Hall. One of them, William Cooke, had rushed in to announce that he had found Plankney’s cloak and boots by Rewley Lock early on the very cold morning of 27 December, and concluded that either someone had drowned himself, or ‘had come to steal horses even though there were no horses in the vicinity to steal’. At this, another of the kitchen staff immediately said ‘God have mercy him, some man hath drowned himself’, on the grounds that the cloak was stiff with hoar-frost, and that ‘nobody there to swim would leave their clothes so long’. This differed somewhat from the report that William Cooke gave to the bedel Woodson the next day, namely that the evening before the discovery of the clothes three scholars had been seen carousing near Rewley Lock on their way home from Botley but ‘fell out by the waye, and two of them came into the groundes being Rulye, and left the clothes there’ – the clothes incidentally by now having become ‘a cloake, a hanger, a pair of bootes, with a pair of russet stockinges and a pair of spurrs’. Unsurprisingly, none of this was followed up, and the assumption that Plankney had committed suicide continued to gain ground. Nobody seems to have considered any other possibility.

Of course the college fellows debated the matter themselves, and recorded their own deliberations in the Lease Register as to whether the likely date of death was before Twelfth Night/Epiphany (5/6 January), or at some time between then and Candlemas (2 February) when the body was found. The register contains a five-point summary of ‘Presumptions and conjectures of his death being before the Feast of the Epiphany’, to which somebody added ‘(alleged by the Subwarden)’. Its arguments were rooted in the facts that Plankney disappeared on Christmas Eve, that his cloak and boots were found on 27 December, and that the state of his body suggested long immersion in the water before being found.

This is followed by an eight-point summary (actually fourteen points, but the scribe stopped numbering them after no. 8) of ‘Presumptions that he was drowned after Twelve Daye or rather not much afore the second daye of Februarye’. Here the fellows pondered the time it takes for a corpse to surface from the bed of a river (‘not above eight dayes’, against which someone else has written ‘false’), and such factors as the swiftness of the current by the lock, which carried the body ‘abought a furlong’ to Osney Bridge – where it could not have lain undiscovered for long since that bridge was frequented ‘dayely and howerlye’ by people passing to and fro. The fellows

debated at length the physical state of the corpse, and the presence of shoes on Plankney's feet when his boots were two hundred yards away, but found neither subject conclusive as a pointer to time of death. They therefore fell back on the belief that if Plankney had intended to do away with himself immediately after Christmas Eve he would not have had such a lucid conversation with his friend Munden, in which he said he had made an inventory of his books and would send for them as he needed them while away. These fellows considered that Plankney did return to Oxford after Christmas, mislaying the inventory of his books (as it was never found) 'in some place', and no doubt also wondering whether he had lost his boots and cloak at dice or to thieves, and why he never got round to changing his shirt. For them the state of the spare shirt was the clincher – since most of the witnesses claimed that the water had not penetrated far into it, that was taken as clear evidence that 'he had not bin longe drowned' when found on 2 February.

We shall never know, and this woeful story sits very oddly between the leases of lands and the presentations to vicarages which make up the rest of the register. It bears strange witness to the personalities and preoccupations of a few individuals of the time, beyond the formal record of their existence in college or town.

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