

History Society:

SIR FRANCIS WALSINGHAM

MASTER TIMOTHY SHUTTLEWORTH

In 1859 *The Times* commented: 'Should the practice of spydom become universal, farewell to all domestic confidence and happiness.'

If the Victorians were wedded to liberalism despite facing serious threats to the state from Fenians and other agitators, this devotion was not shared 300 years earlier by Sir Francis Walsingham, who as the father of modern espionage was the subject of a fine and well received illustrated lecture given to the History Society on 28 January by the journalist, historian and broadcaster, Dr Robert Hutchinson OBE, FSA. Walsingham built a large spy network 'to protect Elizabeth I and the Protestant bulwark of England against a tide of Catholic anarchists', declared Dr Hutchinson. He went on to suggest that much of the spymaster's attitude was probably triggered by his unnerving experience in 1572 when, as Ambassador to France, he witnessed at first hand the massacre of many Protestants on St Bartholomew's Day, forcing him and his family to flee Paris and scarring him emotionally.

Credit is also given to Walsingham for developing techniques still vital in espionage today, eg covert interception of mail, ciphers and code-breaking, dead letter boxes and secret inks. In addition, Walsingham employed 'unsavoury agent provocateurs, double and even triple agents, blackmail and other forms of coercion'. At that point, Dr Hutchinson asked his audience to study a slide of the portrait of Walsingham by de Critz: 'Just look at those eyes', he said, 'Here is a man who would not shrink from using violence to extract information from a hapless prisoner in the Tower.' Walsingham justified himself, if he thought about it at all, by suggesting 'Without torture, we shall not prevail'. Walsingham had intended quite a different career path for himself, having dreamt of following his father, William Walsingham, into the legal profession. His father had in fact become the first Treasurer of Gray's Inn at the end of 1530. His son was admitted to the Inn in 1552, but following the accession of Mary in 1553 and the restoration of the Roman Catholic faith as the state religion in England, Francis was one of 1,000 Protestants who fled to Europe for safety. He travelled extensively on the Continent before returning to England in 1560, once Elizabeth had assumed the throne. Despite the Protestant faith being once again the established church, the 'old faith' remained untouched in Northern England, providing a challenge for Walsingham when he took over Burleigh's intelligence service, which was both at home and abroad 'not fit for purpose'. He became Principal Secretary of State in 1573 and was knighted in 1577.

Dr Hutchinson explained that by 1580, Walsingham's spy network was fully operational. He now had a host of agents countrywide as well as in cities across Europe. Others were in Algiers, Tripoli and Constantinople. His informants were



largely motivated by the prospect of reward but Walsingham believed 'knowledge is never too dear'. He also introduced the first internment camps, mainly in castles, which housed dangerous recusants who were suspected of planning insurrection and assassination.

The greatest danger to Elizabeth's throne was the Catholic Mary, Queen of Scots, and Walsingham was determined to destroy her. Eventually, he succeeded when his spies intercepted correspondence from the Scottish Queen that implicated her in a plot to overthrow Elizabeth. Mary knew that Walsingham was her nemesis and at her trial she attempted to suggest that he had dishonestly engineered her plight. This was all to no avail and she was executed at Fotheringhay in February 1587.

Walsingham died in 1590, though not before he had played a vital role in the defeat of the Spanish Armada two years previously. It was Walsingham's informants in Spain who delivered to the English the priceless information of when and in what strength the Armada was likely to threaten the country. Dr Hutchinson showed a slide of the oak screen in Hall and suggested that, in accordance with tradition, it was highly probable that some of the wood for it came from *The Rosario*, a Spanish ship captured in the sea battle. But care was necessary as the two nations acquired their timber from the same source at this time, namely from the Hanseatic League in the Baltic. This was because of a shortage of wood, then current both in England and Spain, leaving the question of the screen's origin for further debate.

Walsingham is still esteemed by his present day successors. Dr Hutchinson ended: 'If you are fortunate to be invited to lunch with C, the Director of the Secret Intelligence Service, you will be confronted by Walsingham's portrait in his private dining room at MI6 Headquarters.' And, while Walsingham 'remains a man of shadow' and the glare of history rarely catches his quizzical gaze, Dr Hutchinson attested that the story of England was incomplete without the great spymaster's physical presence. ■