

This podcast is brought to you by Bigworld Tours, a company that I am setting up in partnership with a good friend of mine, which is designed to allow you to travel and dive into your passions and interests through our niche tours. Our first tour will be England at the end of April for 9 days and we're calling it Cathedrals and Choirs, as we will focus on the musical history of the English choral tradition visiting and hearing music in such places as King's College Cambridge, Bath and Winchester cathedrals. It's going to be an amazing trip, capped at only 12 people, and if you'd like to learn more, go to [www.bigworld.com](http://www.bigworld.com). Bigworld: travel your passions...

Then start music

Hello, and welcome to the Renaissance English History Podcast. I'm your host, Heather Teysko. This week I'm going to talk about the life of Francis Walsingham, who is popularly remembered as Queen Elizabeth's "spymaster" and was officially her Principle Secretary. He is remembered as the man who founded a modern espionage network to combat the perceived Catholic Threat to Elizabeth's reign. One of his major successes was the entrapment of Mary Queen of Scots, and ultimately the decision to execute her.

But before I get started, just a reminder that if you like this podcast, please rate it in whatever service you use to listen to it, whether it's iTunes or Stitcher, or whatever. Also, I have a fairly new website up at <http://www.Englandcast.com>, with buttons to donate and links to the Patreon page if you are so inclined to support this podcast, either by giving a one time tip, or by making a regular subscription contribution. Both are appreciated.

So, let's get started.

Francis Walsingham was born to a London lawyer's family. His father, William, had been chosen by Henry VIII to write a report on all of the possessions of Cardinal Wolsey when he had fallen from grace. Francis' mother, Joyce, was the younger sister of one of the principal men of Henry's privy chamber, Sir Anthony Denny. So Francis Walsingham had family who were connected at court, and there was a tradition of royal service in his blood.

Francis himself was probably born about 1531 or 2 in Foles Cray in Kent. Kent was a microcosm of England as a whole. The Walsingham lands were in a belt of good farmland from which wheat was sent to London. Nearby on the salt marshes of the Thames estuary, livestock were raised. Commodities like timber and cloth came from the forests of the Weald, and there was also a tiny iron industry that would supply the need for cannon for Henry's navy. And as ancient as these settlements were, there were some major social changes going on in Kent. There was friction as wealth became concentrated in just a few landowners and yeoman farmers. The population was growing, and becoming mobile looking for work. And when Kentish cloth workers refused to pay a forced loan to fund the King's war in France, everyone was reminded of the history of resistance in Kent, from Jack Cade's rebellion of 1450 all the way back to the Peasant's revolt.

Generally governments could rely on the church to teach obedience and keep society stable during times of political turbulence. But because of their trade with Europe, Kent was one of the first areas in England to become familiar with the growing Lutheranism. Catholics in Kent responded to the Protestant threat by supporting Elizabeth Barton, known as the Holy Maid of Kent, who prophesied that the King would not reign for a month if he divorced Katherine of Aragon. Barton was later hung and beheaded for treason, as were the monks who supported her.

It was into this maelstrom of social and religious change that Francis Walsingham was born to Protestant parents. His father died in 1534; he was no more than three years old at the time. Little is known of his early education, but he did enter King's College Cambridge by 1548, at which point King's was leaning towards Protestantism. Protestantism was in Walsingham's blood, as his family also favored the new thinking.

Walsingham went to London to study at the Inns of Court and learn the law, and was there by 1551. By 1552 King Edward was very sick, and died in the early summer of 1553. And his death was followed by the political maneuvering of trying to bring Lady Jane Grey into the succession. I've talked about this on a previous episode, but for those who don't know about Lady Jane Grey, it all had to do with Edward being aware that he was dying, and wanting to ensure that his reformation would live on after his death. He went against his father's will of 1544, and removed his sisters Mary and Elizabeth both from the succession, favoring the children of his aunt, who were Protestants. Lady Jane Grey was, by all accounts, unwilling to take the throne, but was manipulated by her father and the men who feared losing power if Mary Tudor came to the throne.

But of course Mary did inherit the throne by putting up a rebellion of her own. Mary had remained firmly catholic during her brother's reign, and brought back all of the traditions of her religion that had been barred during the reign of her brother. While it seemed popular at first, within a year the first major rebellion led by Thomas Wyatt threatened the security of Mary, and Protestants were faced with the same set of choices that Catholics would be faced with later. Do you pretend and go along with the new faith, paying lip service to it while staying true to your own beliefs in your heart? Do you fight back? Or do you flee and go to Europe? It's interesting that Walsingham, remembered now in large part for being the man who brought such misery to Catholics through his espionage, was in their shoes for several years himself.

He chose to flee to Europe and arrived in Basel in Switzerland in 1555. There were about a thousand people - some, relatives of Walsingham - stretched throughout Switzerland in Zurich, Geneva and Basel. John Foxe was there, working on his book of martyrs, three volumes of which would be dedicated to Walsingham. Walsingham went on to Padua to attend the law university. In Padua he would receive an education in Renaissance humanism, and so when he would eventually return to England it was as a man who was schooled in Swiss Protestant theology as well as the Italian Renaissance.

By 1555 stories about the way Protestants were being treated in England were filtering through to Walsingham and the other exiles. As I talked about in the episode on Mary Tudor, her efforts to bring back Catholicism started out benign. She kept the money from the dissolved monasteries and used it to create seminaries. She restored the mass. She wanted people to be converted through education. But with the return of the mass came a way to enforce it, and as church courts could not sentence someone to death, those who were convicted of heresy went back to the state courts. The punishment for heresy was to be burned alive, a taste of the fires of hell, but also a way to completely destroy the body so there would be nothing left to answer Christ on the day of resurrection. Ordinary people were subjected to an extraordinary level of surveillance. Congregations were monitored to look out for anyone looking away during the elevation of the host during communion, or those who chose to sit behind pillars. Women who chose not to receive communion before childbirth were suspected of being Protestant. Anyone who denied the traditional rites on their deathbed were denied a Christian burial.

Hearing about the burnings and the espionage, those who had fled began to question many of their beliefs about the divine right of monarchs, and monarchs being the Lord's anointed. John Knox himself wrote that the idea of a woman ruling over men was repugnant (though he would have to eat his words later when he met Queen Elizabeth). Walsingham was at the center of these thoughts, and he would come back to England with an altered perception of monarchy itself.

Walsingham returned to England after Mary died and Elizabeth succeeded her. The Protestant refugees came back to England, but interestingly, they brought with them their new thinking which had challenged the idea that monarchs were absolutely appointed by God. The Protestants had challenged Mary Tudor, as a monarch, and so even though she was no longer a threat, the idea that perhaps monarchs weren't divinely appointed was a thought that, once considered, couldn't be unthought.

Walsingham was elected to Elizabeth's first parliament, and was part of the Parliament which confirmed Henry VIII's break with Rome, despite Mary trying to repair the relationship. This was the Parliament which also brought back the 1552 book of common prayer. During this time he got married, first to Anne Barne, a young widow. Interestingly, both her father and first husband had been investors in the Muscovy Company, which had formed to develop trade with Russia, and is the subject of an earlier podcast I did on the quest for the NorthEast passage. She died just two years into their marriage, and left her son Christopher to his care, and Walsingham would always ensure that Christopher was taken care of. She also had a daughter, Alice, who married a Baltic trader who would keep Walsingham informed about the shipping movements of Catholics in the 1570s and 80's. Two years after Anne's death, Walsingham married Ursula St. Barbe, another widow, and took control of her estates on the Isle of Wight. She also had two sons, and then bore Walsingham a daughter, Frances.

The marriage to Ursula seemed to have been a happy one. She traveled with Walsingham when he went abroad as ambassador to France. They were married until Francis's own death, after 24 years of marriage.

Walsingham at this time, in the 1560s and early 1570s wasn't that different than many of the gentlemen at court - he was well travelled and skilled in languages and the law, and had an education firmly rooted in the Renaissance. But so did many other men at court. That said, his time abroad living in exile had taught him to be aware and alert, and when he accepted Secretary Cecil's request to do some undercover work for the crown, he would be caught up in a web of conspiracies that threatened the Queen, England, and the Protestant cause.

The plot to put Mary Stuart on the throne would be what really shot Walsingham up in the estimation of Queen Elizabeth, and set his future career in motion. Mary Stuart was the granddaughter of Henry VIII's sister Margaret, who had married into Scotland. As such, she was descended from Henry VII as his great granddaughter. During the 1540s many wanted her as a bride for King Edward, even to the point of England threatening an invasion. That drove Scotland straight back into the arms of France, which was, of course, England's perpetual enemy. Mary was betrothed to the french Dauphin, Francis, and was taken to France to be educated, marrying Francis in 1558.

When Francis died an early death and Mary came back to Scotland, she became an enticing option for Catholics who were looking for an alternative monarch. Henry himself had annulled his marriage to Anne Boleyn when he was marrying Jane Seymore, and so Catholics could look to Henry's own acts and words as justification that Elizabeth was illegitimate. Mary wound up on English soil after a saga that is long enough for an entire episode, which I should do in the near future! Suffice it to say that she may have been complicit in her second husband's murder, and then married the man who perhaps helped her to murder her second husband. She was forced to abdicate in favor of her son James, and escaped to England. Her goal was to gather her forces to go back to Scotland, but instead she was put under a barely disguised house arrest. Walsingham himself thought she was an agent of the devil. When her appeals for help went unanswered, she turned to the French and Spanish.

Walsingham got involved in this mess through William Cecil, who wanted him to investigate how involved the French were in the plots. He found details showing that the Spanish and French were working together to remove Elizabeth, have Mary crowned, and expected thousands of Catholics in England to revolt in favor of Mary. The reports were sketchy, but as he wrote to Cecil, "there is less danger in fearing too much than too little." It was clear that there could be an assassination attempt at work with foreign support. This would turn into the northern rebellion of 1569, which culminated in a Catholic mass being said in Durham Cathedral, before it was effectively put down.

Soon after, Walsingham was made the Ambassador to France.

The French religious situation was also stressful, with the French Hugonots, the Protestants, struggling to survive amidst a succession that was also complicated with young kings dying early. There was a lot of violence against the Protestants, with horror stories circulating of Catholic gangs murdering widows and children in their own homes. Walsingham arrived to these stories, and he found a home that was in a discreet part of Paris where he could worship in relative peace. Interestingly, diplomats had to pay their own way, and Walsingham had at first protested that he couldn't afford to be posted in France. Cecil was able to provide some assistance, and so Walsingham arrived in 1571.

Elizabeth had still been considering France as a potential place for her to marry, and so Walsingham's post was incredibly important - watch over the interest of the Hugonots, potentially secure a husband for his Queen, keep abreast of potential plots to invade England, and try to get Calais back.

But his time in France was most remembered by the events in August 1572, what became known as the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre, when violence erupted at the wedding of the king's sister to a Protestant. Assassins targeted well known Hugonots who were in Paris for the wedding, and violence quickly spread to the streets and countryside of Paris where several thousand Protestants were killed. And the killing took on the air of a fair or carnival as Catholics paraded victims through the streets, and stopped off to buy drinks in between murders. Walsingham's family was with him at the Embassy, and he did his best to try to make his home safe for the English protestants in Paris. During the period of fallout following the massacre, Walsingham did his job as a diplomat, keeping England and France from going to war and preserving their treaties. But as a Protestant, he was appalled, and became more and more afraid of the Catholic threat in England.

Walsingham came back in 1573, and quickly rose through the support of Cecil and Leicester and others at court who appreciated his work in France. He became the Principal Secretary to Elizabeth, a position that was not defined formally, but as he handled all the royal correspondence and determined the agenda of council meetings, he had great influence in policy. He would support merchants and new exploration, investing in the Muscovy Company and the Levant Company and others.

But his time as Principal Secretary is most remembered by his espionage to counter the perceived Catholic threat. He sanctioned the use of torture against Catholic priests and suspected conspirators. He would always remember St. Bartholomew's Day, and lived in fear that a similar massacre would happen in England if the Catholics became strong again. He employed a network of informers and intercepted commerce, making copies before sending it on. He had a cryptographer on staff, who was an expert in deciphering letters as well as forgery, and he also had a man who was skilled at breaking and repairing seals on letters without detection.

Using these techniques, he was able to catch another plot involving Mary Queen of Scots in 1584. He was able to entrap Mary writing letters she thought were secure when in reality they were being read by Walsingham and his agents. For several years Mary wrote letters, until in 1586 Anthony Babington wrote to her about a plot to free her and kill Elizabeth. Mary's reply was encouraging and supported his plans. Walsingham caught all the conspirators and put Mary on trial, where she was found guilty and a warrant for her execution was drafted. Elizabeth didn't want to sign it, despite Walsingham's pressure. Walsingham made all the arrangements for the execution, and eventually Elizabeth did sign the warrant and gave it to William Davison, who was the junior secretary of state. He passed it to Cecil and a privy council convened without Elizabeth's knowledge, and they agreed to carry out the sentence as soon as possible. When Elizabeth heard about the execution she was very angry and said that she had not meant for Davison to give the warrant to anyone.

Walsingham was of course involved in the espionage around the Spanish Armada, but by the mid 1570's he was often complaining of bad health and going away to his country homes to rest. He died in 1590 at his home, and his grave was lost during the great fire of London.

---

So that's it for this week. The book recommendation is *The Queen's Agent* by John Cooper. I'll put a link up on the site and facebook page, which is [facebook.com/englandcast](https://www.facebook.com/englandcast), where you can again contact me, send me show ideas, or just say nice things. I've also started doing regular quick segments on different aspects of Tudor history on youtube, called the Tudor Minute. There's a link on the blog and facebook page. The next episode I'm going to look at the life of Mary Queen of Scots, since she's played a peripheral role in the last two episodes I've done. It's time to give her an episode of her own. So stay tuned for that in a few more weeks.

Thanks so much for listening. Talk to you soon!