

# Aspects of Recusancy in Oxfordshire: the Case of Owen Fletcher of Woodstock (1553–c.1635)

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## SUMMARY

*Owen Fletcher of Woodstock was a member of an important Woodstock family, whose house survives as the present County Museum. He went up to Trinity College, Oxford, in 1572, where he graduated as a B.A. and then probably went to London to study at the Middle Temple. In 1578 he became a Catholic and spent several years in prison as a recusant until he was able to leave the country and go to the seminary at Rheims, where he became a priest in 1592. He was then sent to England, and glimpses of his work as a priest emerge, as well as his subsequent imprisonment and escape. Definite information ends in 1609, but a record of a burial in 1635 at Clerkenwell might well be his. Owen Fletcher and his family were of the 'middling sort' rather than of the gentry status more usually associated with recusancy in Oxfordshire. It may be that further research being undertaken will uncover other Catholics of similar social status.*

Owen Fletcher is known from probate and other documents in the Woodstock Archives<sup>1</sup> simply as the second son of John Fletcher of Woodstock, Oxfordshire. He is, however, included in Godfrey Anstruther's list of seminary priests as 'Owen Fletcher of Woodstock in Oxfordshire'.<sup>2</sup> The connection between the two sources has not been made before and arises from a reference to Fletcher in *State Papers Domestic*, which lists him as a seminary priest.<sup>3</sup> From that slender start enough facts have emerged to write a rather more complete account of Owen Fletcher's life. It seems that his origins, unlike those of many Oxfordshire recusants, were relatively undistinguished, except in the immediate neighbourhood of Woodstock, where the family played an important part in local affairs.

Owen Fletcher was the second son of John Fletcher and Joan, née Williams, of Woodstock. He was probably born in 1553, in the reign of Mary.<sup>4</sup> Owen received 6s. 8d. under the will of his maternal grandfather, Richard Williams.<sup>5</sup> It is possible that he attended the school in Woodstock run by Sir Martin Cave. The honorific title 'Sir', applied to an ordained priest, was a direct translation of the Latin *dominus*, used in the pre-Reformation Church. Martin Cave was noted in 1547, when the chantries were dissolved, as the priest of the Chantry of Our Lady, New Woodstock, aged 50, 'a man very well learned and meate to kepe a cure'.<sup>6</sup> Cave then became curate of Woodstock, part of the parish of Bladon, and was an example of that group of priests of the 'old Church' who continued through the sixteenth-century changes. When he died, in April 1571, he left to

<sup>1</sup> The Woodstock Archives are kept in the ORO.

<sup>2</sup> Godfrey Anstruther, *The Seminary Priests: a Dictionary of the Secular Clergy of England and Wales, 1558–1850*, 1 (Durham, 1968), p. 119.

<sup>3</sup> *Calendar of State Papers Domestic* (hereafter *CalSPD*) 1581–90, 157, p. 87, no. 77; the index gives 'Fletcher, Owen, a recusant'. See also *Acts of the Privy Council* (hereafter *APC*), 1598–99, ns 29, index, p. 764.

<sup>4</sup> Oxford, Trinity College Archives, Register of Admissions, c.1604, fol. 6, no. 79: 'Owenus Fletcher dio[diocesis] Oxon annorum 19 admissus est scholaris Junii 3 Anno 1572'. Joseph Foster, *Alumni Oxoniensis*, 2 (Oxford and London 1891), p. 508, col. b, however, gives his age in 1572 as 21.

<sup>5</sup> ORO, MS Wills Oxon, 185, fol. 75.

<sup>6</sup> Rose Graham, ed. and transcribed, *Chantry Certificates*, ORS, 1 (1919), p. 23.

his brother John Cave in his will ‘my flockebed in the scole howse chamber’.<sup>7</sup> He also left 46s. 8d. to Joane Fletcher, probably Owen’s mother.<sup>8</sup> Although there is no direct record in Woodstock, apart from Cave’s will, it was often the case that chantry foundations included an obligation on the chantry priest to provide grammar education for local boys. Owen then proceeded to the University of Oxford, the first in his family to do so, and he matriculated as a commoner of Trinity College, Oxford, on 12 December, 1572 at the age of 19.<sup>9</sup>

John Fletcher’s father, Thomas, who died in 1545, was a butcher and skinner by trade. He was also an alderman and became mayor in 1535. Thomas was a considerable landowner in Woodstock and Yarnton, acquiring some land after the dissolution of local monastic land.

John, Owen’s father, inherited the house – Fletcher’s House – the garden, and the slaughterhouse from his father and continued the trade of butcher and skinner. He was an alderman of Woodstock and a member of one of the prominent families in the town. He was, for example, a witness to the will of Owen Whitton – the Whittons were important people in Woodstock and Woodstock Park; perhaps Owen was named after Owen Whitton. Joan, John Fletcher’s wife, was the daughter of Alderman Richard Williams, who died in 1561. John’s brother, Thomas, was a member of the Skinners’ Livery Company of the City of London. John’s sister, Margaret Fletcher, married Robert Cornwell, the son of Alderman William Cornwell of Woodstock, who died in 1552. William Cornwell was a baker and brewer by trade and built a sizeable house at 13–17 High Street, Woodstock. Another property was left to William’s widow for life, with a reversion to her grandson Richard, who was later apprenticed to his uncle Thomas, Master Skinner of the Guild of Skinners in London. Richard himself became a Master Skinner in 1569 and died in London in 1585, leaving money in his will for the foundation of the grammar school in Woodstock.<sup>10</sup> Richard’s mother, Margaret, was widowed in 1545, and when she married again her second husband was a yeoman, Hugh Humphrey. They had five daughters, mentioned in Richard Cornwell’s will.

Unfortunately John Fletcher’s will does not survive. John was mayor seven times, the last in 1575–6, and he died between 1576 and 1581, when Fletcher’s House was quitclaimed to his son Henry. Henry was an ironmonger by trade, a freeman of the borough of Woodstock, and a common councillor. He died in 1595, and his widow, Margery, continued to live in Fletcher’s House, part of which she leased to Alderman Thomas Browne. Elizabeth and Joan, Owen’s two sisters have not been traced.<sup>11</sup>

John and Joan Fletcher’s last child was Thomas. He became a freeman Skinner of the City of London in 1585, was granted arms in 1613, and died in 1617, leaving a son, John, who bore arms as Thomas’s heir.<sup>12</sup>

The Fletcher family and their relatives, the Cornwells, could well be described as ‘of the middling sort’. Their wealth and importance lay in trade, and their importance in Woodstock is reflected in their holding of high office in the borough hierarchy of government. But at no time do they seem to have claimed gentry status; in Woodstock being freemen of the Royal Borough was enough to give them all the status they desired.

Owen was the only member of the Fletcher family at this time to attend the university, for the family a step towards a possible connection with the law. He graduated as a B.A. on 24 May 1574.<sup>13</sup>

Within the university the ‘old religion’ held sway for many. Indeed, Elizabeth I found it

<sup>7</sup> ORO MS Wills Oxon, 185, fol. 75.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Register of Admissions, fol. 6, no. 79.

<sup>10</sup> TNA PROB11/29 Brudenell, Woodstock Borough Muniments 97, pp. 1–2.

<sup>11</sup> Patricia Crutch, *Ten Woodstock Families of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, Woodstock Society Local History Group (Charlbury, 2005), pp. 63–72.

<sup>12</sup> BL, MS Harley 6140, fol. 63; BL Add. MS 12.225, fol. 42.

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Foster, *Alumni Oxoniensis*, 2 (Oxford and London 1891), p. 508, col. b.

necessary to visit it in August 1566, only a few years before Owen went up, in order to judge its loyalty to the religious changes then in train. The Earl of Leicester, as Chancellor of the University, led her procession into the city, where 1,700 students had remained during the long vacation to welcome her. One of the disputations was entitled ‘Whether subjects may fight against wicked princes’ – a topic which clearly allowed students no realistic chance to defend their loyalty to the ‘old religion’.

Owen’s college, Trinity, had been founded in 1555, during the reign of Mary, using the buildings of Durham College. Like St John’s, it was founded by a Catholic layman, in this case Sir Thomas Pope. He intended his fellows for the Catholic Church, although commoners were also to be admitted. He was anxious to follow the new ideas being promulgated before and during the Council of Trent (1562–3). In particular the Church urged proper education for the clergy in new-style seminaries, where spiritual formation as well as intellectual studies could take place.

The University of Oxford provided a number of leading recusants, among them Edmund Campion of St John’s, who had spoken in the disputations before Queen Elizabeth in 1566, and William Allen. William Allen was born in 1522 and went up to Oriel College, Oxford. He was elected a fellow in 1550, an M.A. in 1554, and Principal of St Mary’s Hall, Oxford, in 1556. In 1558 he was made a canon of York Minster, but in 1561 resigned all his offices and left for the University of Louvain, where he studied with old friends from Oxford, Thomas Harding and Nicholas Harpsfield. Allen was ordained priest in 1565, after having revisited England, especially some known centres of recusancy. In 1567 Elizabeth ordered his arrest. He therefore returned to Louvain, and from there in 1568 he opened a College for English Catholics at the newly founded University of Douai, where the first Chancellor was Dr Richard Smith of Merton College. He was joined by a number of refugees from the universities, including Dr Owen Lewis of New College, ex-Regius Professor of Canon Law at Oxford. In 1570 Allen was elected Professor of Divinity at the university with a salary of 200 gold crowns per annum. This money set the new college on its feet, and in 1575 the pope gave it 1,200 gold crowns a year. By 1576 there were 120 students at the college, twenty became priests each year following, and the majority of the twenty were sent to England each year. Douai was in the centre of the area of the Spanish Netherlands where rebellions took place. In 1578 the English were expelled from Douai and settled at Rheims, a university founded in 1545. It was to Rheims that Owen Fletcher was later to travel. The pope saw Douai as a model for seminaries, and in 1575 he founded the English College in Rome on this model. Philip II also founded an English seminary at Valladolid in 1589. In 1587 Allen was made a cardinal, and he died in Rome in 1594. His college had returned to Douai in 1593, just a year before his death.

Owen Fletcher’s contemporaries at Trinity included John Appletree, who graduated in 1573 and was ordained priest in 1579;<sup>14</sup> George Errington, who graduated in 1579 and was ordained priest about 1583; Thomas Ford, a fellow of Trinity, who was ordained priest at Douai in 1573 and returned to Oxford, keeping in touch with his old College.<sup>15</sup> William Spenser, a future martyr, and William Warford, a Jesuit, were also Owen’s contemporaries, but neither was yet Catholic – details of their conversion would be of considerable interest. In 1583 a group of five Trinity men, led by Edward Stransham of St John’s, went to Rheims to enter the seminary.<sup>16</sup> He was probably the son of James Ansleye of Oxford, a gentleman,<sup>17</sup> but assumed various names, Transcham, Stransham, and finally Barbar. Recusants, especially priests, often used aliases in order to protect their families. Stransham was hanged at Tyburn in January 1586.

These details of Owen Fletcher’s contemporaries at Oxford may provide some explanation for his conversion to Catholicism. There is no evidence that any other member of his family was

<sup>14</sup> Information in this paragraph is based on Anstruther, *Seminary Priests*, p. 119.

<sup>15</sup> Catholic Record Society (hereafter CRS), *Biographical Studies, 1534–1829* (London, 1956), 3, p. 324.

<sup>16</sup> J. H. Pollen, ed. and trans., *Acts of the English Martyrs* (London, 1891), p. 225.

<sup>17</sup> Mrs Bryan Stapleton, *A History of the Post-Reformation Catholic Missions in Oxfordshire* (London, 1906), p. 3.

a Catholic, although the influence of Martin Cave, schoolmaster in Woodstock, may have been important for the young Owen. In 1578 he became a Catholic – it is worth noting that he was baptized during the reign of Mary and therefore as a Catholic. A document of 30 September 1588, showing prisoners in and about London, and their guilt, says, ‘These persons are only recusants.’ It lists Owen Fletcher and adds, ‘Owyn Fletcher was reconsoyled X years past.’<sup>18</sup> In October 1578 a list of papists in London made by Davie Jones includes ‘Mr Fletcher, a utter [outer] barrister at the Middle Temple dwelling at Fleet Street at the further end.’<sup>19</sup> This may or may not be Owen. It may be that Owen continued after graduation with studies in the law at an Inn of Court. At this time aspiring families such as the Fletchers of Woodstock and London would have wanted a younger son to become a lawyer and help to further the family fortunes. His family connections in London with the Fletchers of the Skinners’ Company would have provided a base for him, and he could have begun his law studies in 1574, when he came down from Oxford.

The Middle Temple is a long-established Inn of Court, but of its fifteenth-century buildings only the Temple Church remains. The Inn was governed by its senior members, known as benchers, led by the treasurer, who was elected by the benchers. The definition of an utter barrister is one who has recently been called to the profession and who is allowed to plead only outside the bar, as opposed to the more senior benchers, who are allowed to plead within the bar. The utter barristers were called to the ‘utter bar’, and they studied the law under a master, who was a bencher. Not all utter barristers could lodge in chambers in the Middle Temple, but lodgings could usually be found at the Black Spread Eagle, a tavern in Fleet Street.<sup>20</sup> The Inns of Court were ecclesiastical peculiars and therefore not subject to episcopal jurisdiction.

The Elizabethan Act of Supremacy (1559) demanded the taking of an oath by ‘all ecclesiastical persons’ and all legal and state officials, recognizing the Queen’s supremacy ‘as well in all spiritual or ecclesiastical things or causes as temporal’. They had to deny ‘all foreign jurisdictions, powers, superiorities, and authorities’, which meant specifically that of the pope.<sup>21</sup> This was followed in 1563 by an addition to the oath applied to ‘all manner of persons that have taken or hereafter shall take any degree of learning in or at the common laws of the realm as well Utter Barristers as Benchers Readers Ancients in any House or Houses of Court.’ The oath was not implemented as such in the Inns until 5 July 1590, when seventeen calls to the bar say, ‘They and everie of them to take the othe of obedience at suche time as the benche of this howse shalle thinke meete.’<sup>22</sup> Elizabeth’s advisers regarded the Inns of Court as much infected by ‘poperie.’<sup>23</sup> Their tolerant atmosphere was well known: ‘The Inns were part of a suburban area that had an unusual concentration of Catholics and provided a focus of attraction and even a refuge, for Catholic priests and their helpers.’<sup>24</sup>

Further efforts were made by the government to control the Inns and their members. In May 1574 an order was made to ensure that all barristers and benchers would lodge in the chambers of the Inns. But a survey of the Middle Temple in 1574 found 11 benchers, 40 utter barristers, and 139 ‘other gentlemen’, making a total of 190, of whom 130 were accommodated in ninety-two chambers, and 60 had no accommodation in the Inn.<sup>25</sup>

Owen Fletcher’s entry to the Middle Temple would therefore have put him among many

<sup>18</sup> ‘Official Lists of Catholic Prisoners during the reign of Queen Elizabeth’, pt 2 (1581–1602), CRS *Miscellanea* 2, CRS 2(1906), no. 3, p. 283.

<sup>19</sup> *CalSPD, Addenda, 1566–79*, Oct. 1578, p. 551; SP 15/25, 204, 25 Oct. 1578 (on microfilm).

<sup>20</sup> Geoffrey de C. Parminter, *Edmund Plowden, an Elizabethan Recusant Lawyer*, CRS Monograph Series 4 (1987), p. 11.

<sup>21</sup> 1 Eliz. c.1, 19: Act of Supremacy, 1559, *Statutes of the Realm*, 4 (London, 1819), pt 1, p. 350.

<sup>22</sup> John Bruce Williamson, *History of the Temple, London* (London, 1924).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 193.

<sup>24</sup> Geoffrey de C. Parminter, ‘Elizabethan popish recusancy in the Inns of Court’, *BIHR*, Special Supplement, 11 (1976), p. 10.

<sup>25</sup> Parminter, *Edmund Plowden*, p. 110.

recusants – the term applied by the authorities to those who refused to attend the new services in their parish churches. His conversion in 1578 belongs to the period of his life when he was probably an utter barrister. He may even have been among friends. It is worth noting that several of the recusant members of the Middle Temple were Oxfordshire or Berkshire people, including Edmund Plowden himself.<sup>26</sup> Plowden (1518–85) was one of the most famous lawyers of his day, whose expertise was used by the Crown in spite of his adherence to Catholicism. He was MP for Wallingford in 1553, and his principal estate was at Shiplake. Edward Plowden appears on the list compiled by Davie Jones on which Owen Fletcher appears.<sup>27</sup>

In 1582 Jeffrye Gates reported to the Queen's officer Connell that he had 'apprehended three notorious Recusants Owen Fletcher, John Noble<sup>28</sup> and Lady Anne Ratcliffe<sup>29</sup> for which he is threatened and ill-used by Dr Forde. Desires that Dr Forde may be called to account for his unjust information.'<sup>30</sup> Two years later, in January 1584, Owen Fletcher, 'yeoman', was committed to the Gatehouse prison in London as a recusant.<sup>31</sup> Another document on those in the Gatehouse prison names 'Owine Fletcher yeoman sente in by the Lord Grace of Canterburie the 27<sup>th</sup> January 1583'.<sup>32</sup> On 8 April 1584 a certificate of all in the Gatehouse prison lists 'Owine' Fletcher and John Noble;<sup>33</sup> Lady Ann Ratcliffe was by then in the Fleet prison.<sup>34</sup> In December 1586 Nicholas Berden, a spy working for Sir Francis Walsingham, Secretary of State, listed Owen Fletcher as imprisoned with other papists in the Gatehouse prison.<sup>35</sup> Walsingham maintained an extensive spy network in both England and Europe. The certificate of all seminary priests and recusants in the Gatehouse, dated 18 June 1586, lists Owen Fletcher<sup>36</sup> and states that he was arrested in January 1583.

In July 1586 Walsingham was anxious to clear the London prisons so that they could accommodate the Babington conspirators, who had planned to assassinate Elizabeth and replace her by the Catholic Mary Queen of Scots. Walsingham's agents, Nicholas Berden and Thomas Phillipps, made notes on prisoners who could be moved and listed those who could be banished or sent to Wisbeche prison. They listed Owen Fletcher as among 'meane persons meete for what place you please'.<sup>37</sup> This description of Owen seems to fit the status of his family as 'of the middling sort', rather than an earlier description of him as 'yeoman', which was perhaps applied because of his earlier studies at the Middle Temple. By December 1586 Owen Fletcher was still in the Gatehouse prison.<sup>38</sup> On 30 September 1588 a document headed 'Prisoners in and about London and their guilt' lists 'These persons onely Recusants' (that is, not seminary priests). The list includes 'Owyn Fletcher who was reconsoyled X yeares past'.<sup>39</sup> By contrast, other headings read, for example, 'These recusants refuse the oathe in court and say plainly they will take part in the pope's army.'

Owen Fletcher entered the seminary at Rheims (which had been moved from Douai) on 23 December 1591. There is no record of his escape from the Gatehouse prison, but recusants were at times banished from the kingdom, and his journey to Rheims may have been the result of this. The Cecil papers record that on 31 July 1591 'Owyn Fletcher of Woodstock in Oxfordshire

<sup>26</sup> John Fox, 'The Bromes of Holton Hall: a forgotten recusant family', *Oxoniensia*, 68 (2003), p. 75.

<sup>27</sup> 'Official lists of Catholic prisoners', p. 283.

<sup>28</sup> John Noble of St Mary Woolnoth, Walbrook Ward, City of London, convicted as a recusant 1597: Hugh Bowler, ed., *Recusant Roll no. 4 (1595–1596): an Abstract in English*, CRS 61 (1970), p. 182.

<sup>29</sup> *Diocesan Returns of Recusants*, CRS 22 (1930), p. 47: 1577 St Gyles without Criplegate 'The Ladie Ratcliffe wife to Mr Fuller as a recusant'. See also *CalSPD, Elizabeth*, 118, no. 73: Diocese of London returns of recusants.

<sup>30</sup> *CalSPD, 1581–90*, 157, 1582? p. 87, no. 77, 'Petition of Jeffrye Gates to the Council'.

<sup>31</sup> 'Official Lists of Catholic Prisoners', pp. 245, 271.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 235.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 234.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 271.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 253.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 255.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 270.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 234.

went over to the seminary sithance December last past.<sup>40</sup> This would mean that he spent a year in Rheims before formally entering the seminary. He received minor orders on 24 February 1592; he was ordained priest at Laon on 24 May and sent to England as a priest on 4 November 1592.<sup>41</sup>

The work of the seminary's founder, William Allen, was of crucial importance to the continuance of Catholicism in England. He saw the need to replace the rapidly dwindling band of old Marian priests, many of whom had stayed in their parishes, but some of whom were in prison. By 1596 only forty of them remained. Between 1574 and 1580, a hundred seminary priests were sent to England. A few years later, in 1598, there were three hundred seminary priests in England, together with sixteen Jesuits; and the forty Marian priests still living. Owen would thus have been swelling an already considerable total. Of these priests, a hundred and sixteen seminary priests, seven Jesuits, one Benedictine monk, and one Franciscan friar were to be executed as traitors.<sup>42</sup>

Owen may well have gone to Clerkenwell as a priest. In 1593 a recusant Thomas Sleepe of Clerkenwell said that he 'had conference with one Fletcher, preacher at Clerkenwell'.<sup>43</sup> Two years earlier, in 1591, the vicar of Clerkenwell, Mr Fletcher, had been accused of accepting money from recusants and allowing them popish rites.<sup>44</sup> It seems more than likely that it was Owen Fletcher to whom Thomas Sleepe spoke.

Owen's connection with Clerkenwell is interesting in that this was a centre for members of the Skinners' Company and was the site of a well that was used by skinners during the medieval period. Anstruther states that 'London Livery Companies show no hostility to recusants and the oath imposed on apprentices could be taken without scruple by any catholic'.<sup>45</sup>

It seems that Owen's ministry in Clerkenwell was interrupted. Some time in 1597–8 John Faulkner visited Father Martin Lister in the Marshalsea prison, in Southwark.<sup>46</sup> Owen Fletcher was imprisoned with him, as the following letter of 31 December 1598 records:

A letter to the bishop of London, Sir Thomas Gerard and Sir Richard Martin, knights and one Richard Topcliffe, esq. Requiring them to examine one Robert Wiseman who was suspected to have been privye to the conveying away of Martin Lister a seminarye preyst and one Fletcher both prysoners in the Marshalsea and after the examinacions to certifiye their Lordships accordingly and what course they thought meete to be proceeded in against him.<sup>47</sup>

Clearly Owen had escaped from the Marshalsea prison. This is supported by some later evidence, for in about 1609 William Udall, an informer, wrote to Sir Julius Caesar saying that Humfrey Crosse and his confederates had helped priests to escape, including one Mr Fletcher.<sup>48</sup> According to an Elizabethan act of 1585,<sup>49</sup> Owen would have escaped to almost certain execution. Jesuits and seminary priests were declared traitors and subjected to capital punishment, usually hanging, drawing, and quartering. An index to the *Acts of the Privy Council* of 1598–9 lists Fletcher

<sup>40</sup> CRS *Miscellanea*, Recusant Records, 53 (1960), Cecil Papers, p. 116.

<sup>41</sup> English College of Douai, *The First and Second Diaries of the English College, Douay*, introd. T. F. Knox (London, 1878), pp. 15, 31.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. lxiv.

<sup>43</sup> Anthony G. Petti, ed., *Recusant Documents from the Ellesmere Manuscripts*, CRS 60(1968), p. 49.

<sup>44</sup> *CalSPD*, 1591–4, vol. 238, 1591, 126, 1, p. 28.

<sup>45</sup> Anstruther, *Seminary Priests*, 2, p. xii.

<sup>46</sup> Antony Kenny, ed., *The 'Responsa Scholarum' of the English College, Rome*, pt. 1, 1598–1621, CRS 54,(1962), no. 360, p. 71.

<sup>47</sup> *APC*, 1598–99, ns 29, 31 Dec. 1598, pp. 422–3, 'A letter to the Bishope of London [and others]';

<sup>48</sup> P. R. Harris, 'The reports of William Udall, informer, 1605–1612', *Recusant History*, 8 (1966), pp. 192–284: for Fletcher see pp. 266–7.

<sup>49</sup> 27 Eliz. c.2: An Act againste Jesuites Semynarie Priestes and such other like disobedient Persons, *Statutes of the Realm*, 4 (London, 1819), pt 1, p. 706.

as a seminary priest.<sup>50</sup> William Wiseman, possibly a relation of Robert, was a well-known Catholic gentleman of Essex at this time.<sup>51</sup>

In fact, Owen avoided execution. In 1603 Henry Clyffe of London, whose uncle was notary to the Bishop of London, went to become a priest at the English College at Rome. He said he had made a general confession to a priest named Fletcher and then come abroad with his uncle's licence. Hard evidence for Owen Fletcher's life runs out in 1598 with his escape from the Marshalsea prison in Southwark. Although Owen was disinherited by his family, since his younger brother, Thomas, inherited after the death of the eldest son, Henry, in 1595, it is possible that they sought to protect him in his old age, and he may have remained in London, where priests and recusants found hiding places. The Fletcher family of the Skinners' Company were important citizens of London, some living in Clerkenwell where the Skinners' well had been a centre of the Skinners' Company. Owen's brother Thomas, who had become a Freeman Skinner of the City of London in 1585,<sup>52</sup> died in 1617. His son John continued as a Skinner and also visited Woodstock. Thomas left money to the grammar school in Woodstock and other bequests to the town.<sup>53</sup> Richard Cornwell, Owen Fletcher's first cousin, expressly excluded from his will any of his relatives who had become Catholics or had married Catholics.<sup>54</sup> This is a very unusual clause in a will of this time and perhaps indicates the scandal caused by Owen's conversion and ordination as a Catholic priest.

The register of St James's Church, Clerkenwell,<sup>55</sup> records the burial of Owen Fletcher on 25 January 1635. Below his name is written 'a poor woman', buried the same day. If the register entry above is his, then he would have been 82 years old at his death.

The story of Owen Fletcher, though fragmentary, brings out clearly the themes of recusant life in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Influences from the 'old religion', in school and university brought Owen into contact with a group of people he obviously came to admire and in the end wished to join. The support of groups at university and in the Middle Temple gave him a reasonably safe base, and even in prison he was with friends. The ability of recusants to survive the penal laws against them is again well illustrated by Owen's life. As a seminary priest he did not pay the final penalty, but succeeded in surviving imprisonment – by escaping – and then seems to have lived on in the refuges London provided. His experience was not unusual, but much may have depended on his connections in London with the Fletcher family, well-placed Livery Company members, who may have been willing to help and shelter him, especially at the end of his life. Although his cousin Richard Cornwell made public in his will his opposition to catholic survival, this may show the wide range of responses within a family to a 'renegade' member like Owen. The comparative wealth of the family might well have helped him in his last years.

Oxford was known to be a stronghold of recusancy. In 1561 the mayor informed the council that there were 'not three houses in it wherein there were not papists', only to be hastily warned not to divulge this elsewhere.<sup>56</sup> The character and extent of recusancy in the county, however, is still under investigation.

In 1592 a list of Oxfordshire recusants has twenty-one 'recusants remaining at liberty',<sup>57</sup> of whom eighteen are men living in various villages and three in Oxford itself. Eight further 'gentlemen' are listed, four of whom are 'at liberty upon Bonds', and the others 'committed to prison', among them 'the lady Stonar'. These people represent centres where others also followed

<sup>50</sup> *APC, 1598–99*, index, p. 764.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 31 Aug. 1598, 'Letters requiring contributions from recusants', p. 118: 'Essex – William Wiseman, esquier'.

<sup>52</sup> London, Guildhall Library MS 30719A/1, Skinners' Freeman, 1496–1602.

<sup>53</sup> Woodstock Borough Muniments, 97, summary of the will.

<sup>54</sup> TNA PROB 11/29 Brudenell: ORO, Woodstock Borough Muniments, 97, pp. 1–2.

<sup>55</sup> London, Metropolitan Archives P76/JS1/001 (microfilm ref. X097/355).

<sup>56</sup> Quoted by Philip Hughes, *The Reformation in England*, 3 (London, 1954), p. 124.

<sup>57</sup> Calendar of Cecil MSS, part 3, see also Stapleton, *A History of the Post-Reformation Catholic Missions in Oxfordshire*, pp. 2–3.

the 'old religion' - their families, their associates, and their servants. Oxfordshire had 'safe houses' where priests could be sheltered, perhaps the most well known is Lyford Grange, where Edmund Campion was captured in 1581. In 1623 a Jesuit priest Richard Blount was made Provincial of the Province of England by Rome. Blount attended Oxford University briefly, was converted, and left to become a priest, returning to England as a Jesuit in 1590. He organized the local 'missions' in Oxfordshire, of which Woodstock was one centre; this organization lasted until 1827.

Anstruther's list of seminary priests<sup>58</sup> is arranged by county. His list of seminary priests born in Oxfordshire includes thirty-one from 1557 to 1603 and eleven from 1603 to 1659. Of the first group only one is now known to be a convert – Owen Fletcher himself – and seven of them were executed; of the second group, three are known to have been converts and none was executed. Seventeen of the first group were graduates of Oxford, attending various colleges. Only one of the second group was at Oxford. He, Edmund Smith of Crowmarsh Gifford, attended Trinity College and was converted there in 1598 by a Jesuit priest.

Owen Fletcher's life covers the whole period of change in religion – from his birth and baptism in Mary's reign, his education by a Marian priest, his education at a college at Oxford founded to promote the catholic faith, and his friendship with fellow students who were to take his road to priesthood and, in some cases, to death as martyrs to their cause. Further research is needed into the origins of his contemporaries from Oxfordshire who took this same course, either as seminary priests or as Jesuits. Their lives may show that Oxfordshire had a larger group than is often supposed of families and individuals who wished to remain within the 'old religion' and were 'of the middling sort'. It has been observed that 'One of the most dynamic sectors of English religion, the devotion and activism of the middling sort, was for the most part being lost to Catholicism.'<sup>59</sup> The ability of Oxfordshire people to continue on this path needs further investigation.

<sup>58</sup> Anstruther, *Seminary Priests* (see n. 2 above).

<sup>59</sup> Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Later Reformation in England*, 2nd edn (Basingstoke, 2001), p. 125.