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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WKLVFROOHJH·V
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 DFRURQHU·VLQTXHVWDQGthe college IHOORZV·GHOLEHUDWLRQVRQWKHXQKDSS\
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 WRKLVIDWKHU·VKRXVHLQ/RQGRQ. On ¶WKH
)ULGD\DIWHU7ZHOIGD\H·-DQXDU\) however his father came to Oxford, looking for his son
who was supposed to have returned to college WRVHHNSHUPLVVLRQIRUDPRQWK·VVLFN-leave. On
6W-RKQ·VGD\'HFHPEHU¶DFORNHDSDLUHRIERRWHVDQGDKDQJHU·WKHIULQJHGORRSRUVWUDSLQ
which a small sword or dagger w

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KLPEHFDXVHWKH\KDG¶H[FKDQJHGKDUVKZRUGVZKHQWKH\SDUWHGLQ/RQGRQ·DIWHUWKH\RXQJPDQ
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 aVKHNQHZKHKDGWRDSSO\IRUD¶FDXVH·OLFHQFHWR
EHDEVHQW¶WRZKLFKWKHVDLG-RKQ3ODQNQH\DQVZHUHGZHHSLQJ´)DWKHU,WKLQNWKHQWKDW\HVKDOO
VHHPHQRPRUHµ6HYHUDOGHSRQHQWVIURPWKHFROOHJHDJUHHGWKDWZKHQ3ODQNQH\VHQLRUFDPHWR
New College looking for his son, his immediate reaction was WKDWKLVVRQ¶KDGFDVWKLPVHOIDZD\
EXWLIKHGLHGOLNHDQKRQHVWPDQKHZRXOGQRWFDUH· Another fellow, Richard Warneford, testified
that Plankney had suffered from violent headaches a fortnight before Christmas and that although
¶KHG\GFDOOKLPGLYHUVW\PHVWRSOD\ZLWKKLPDWWHQQHFH·3ODQNQH\DOZD\VUHIXVHGDOWKRXJKKH
¶GLGWDONDVUHDVRQDEO\DVKHZDVZRQWWRGR·
3ODQNQH\·VFORVHVWIULHQGLQFROOHJH-RKQ0XQGHQ (a staunch catholic who would shortly
flee to Europe as a result of %LVKRS+RUQH·VYLVLWDWLRQDQGZRXOGHQGXSyears later captured by
:DOVLQJKDP·VPHQDQGH[HFXWHGDW7\EXUQ, 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 DOVRQRWHGWKDW3ODQNQH\¶G\GFRXQWHUID\WHV\FNQHVVH·LQRUGHU to get leave
from college, although KHGLGFRQFHGHWKDW3ODQNQH\¶ZDVQRWDVPHU\ at any tyme as he was wont
WREH·7KLVYLHZZDVVKDUHGE\7KRPDV*HIIUH\DQG:LOOLDP5H\QROGVZKRVKDUHG3ODQNQH\V·VHW
RIURRPVLQFROOHJH%RWKFRPPHQWHGWKDWEHIRUH&KULVWPDV3ODQNQH\KDG¶NHSWKLVFKDPEHU·DQG
¶GLGQRWSOD\KLVOXWHDVPXFKDVKHXVHGWR·EXW5H\QROGV·VHYLGHQFHproved of little further value
since he said he had nothing in common with either of

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debated at length the physical state of the corpse, and WKHSUHVHQFHRIVKRHVRQ3ODQNQH\·VIHHW
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 SODFH·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 ²
since most of the witnesses claimed that the water had not penetrated far into it, that was taken as
FOHDUHYLGHQFHWKDW¶KHKDGQRWELQORQJHGURZQHG·ZKHQIRXQGRQ)HEUXDU\
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.

Jennifer Thorp
Archivist