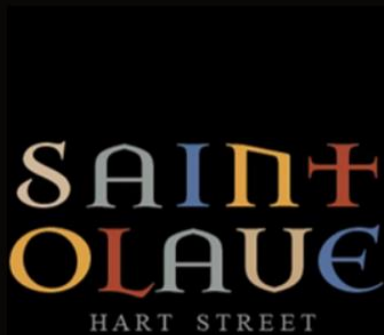
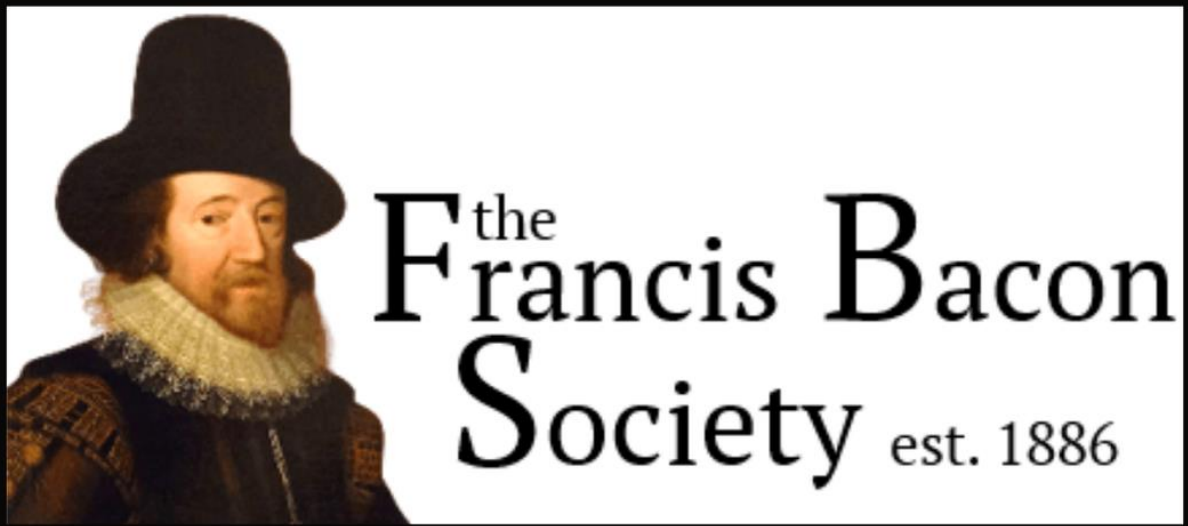




The Hidden History & Legacy of Tudor Espionage



TALK TRANSCRIPT

A talk given by Sally Gibbins, Gary Cordice & Jono Freeman of the Francis Bacon Society at St Olave Hart Street, London on Tuesday 22nd September 2026.

St Olave's: The Hidden History & Legacy of Espionage



Good evening, and welcome to *St Olave's: The Hidden History and Legacy of Espionage*. Thank you for joining us in a church that stood at the heart of the early intelligence network in Elizabethan England.

I am Sally Gibbins from the Francis Bacon Society, joined by fellow members, actors and heritage educators Gary Cordice and Jono Freeman. Over the next hour we will move from this parish church to Walsingham House, the Tower, Essex House, the Armada, Shakespeare, the Bacon brothers, ciphers and codes, Bletchley Park, the NSA and the modern intelligence world.

Before we start, I would just like to thank Reverend Phillip Dawson for inviting us to speak at his beautiful church and also to Professor David Stupples who has provided a very exciting addition to the evening. We are very fortunate to have an Enigma machine here tonight which is the actual "Shark" (as it was codenamed at Bletchley Park) and the model that made Alan Turing famous. David is going to introduce the machine to us after the talk.

Tonight's story begins in the shadows, but it is not simply a tale of secret agents. It is a world of fear and faith, loyalty and betrayal, coded letters, secret communications, theatre, survival, and the urgent race to discover secret and often dangerous information.

Spying is as old as human curiosity. We want to know what is hidden: who can be trusted, who is watching, and whether information will protect us or destroy us. That is why espionage still fascinates us.

Today we still face similar dangerous threats but culturally we tend to romanticise espionage: James Bond, exotic locations, coded messages, hidden agendas and the glamour of danger. Ian

Fleming himself worked in naval intelligence, so Bond's world has roots in real wartime secrecy.



But Tudor espionage was not glamorous. It was dangerous, underfunded, improvised and often brutal. A wrong letter, a broken cipher, or a careless word could end in the Tower, torture and sometimes on the scaffold.

The tools have changed, satellites, cyber operations, signals intelligence, surveillance cameras, but the essential work remains recognisable: gathering, assessing, protecting, encoding and decoding information. So how did we get to this:



Today in the UK we have three main intelligence services MI5, MI6 and GCHQ.

MI5 is located at Thames House on Millbank in central London (Westminster). It operates domestically to protect the UK's homeland, its people, and its economic interests from internal threats. So, it monitors counter-terrorism, counter-espionage and cyber defence.

MI6 is located around a mile away at Vauxhall Bridge. It operates externally to gather foreign intelligence and protect British interests abroad. It collects secret information outside the UK to uncover hidden intentions of foreign states and non-state actors. It counteracts overseas dangers including terrorism and cyber-attacks. It conducts secret operations abroad to disrupt threats before they reach the UK.

GCHQ main headquarters is known as "The Doughnut" in Cheltenham, Gloucestershire. During WWII, the US military built up a highly sophisticated, secure telecommunications infrastructure in the region. GCHQ's wartime predecessor was based at Bletchley Park, but post-war GCHQ moved to Cheltenham allowing the British government to utilise the network. GCHQ is the cyber and signals intelligence (SIGINT) agency providing data and cyber defence for the nation. It intercepts, decodes, and analyses digital communications, radar, and electronic data from around the world.



The roots of this now highly structured and disciplined intelligence culture can be traced back to Elizabethan England, and to the streets around St Olave's.

Codes, ciphers, anagrams, acrostics and emblems were familiar in Elizabethan and Jacobean culture. They could be playful in court entertainments, but at state level secret communication was a matter of national survival.

So, the question for tonight is: how did Tudor England, and this church, become a theatre of plots, surveillance, state security and the long pre-history of modern intelligence?

St Olave's looks, at first glance, like an unassuming parish church tucked into the City. In the late sixteenth century, it stood beside power, danger and intelligence.

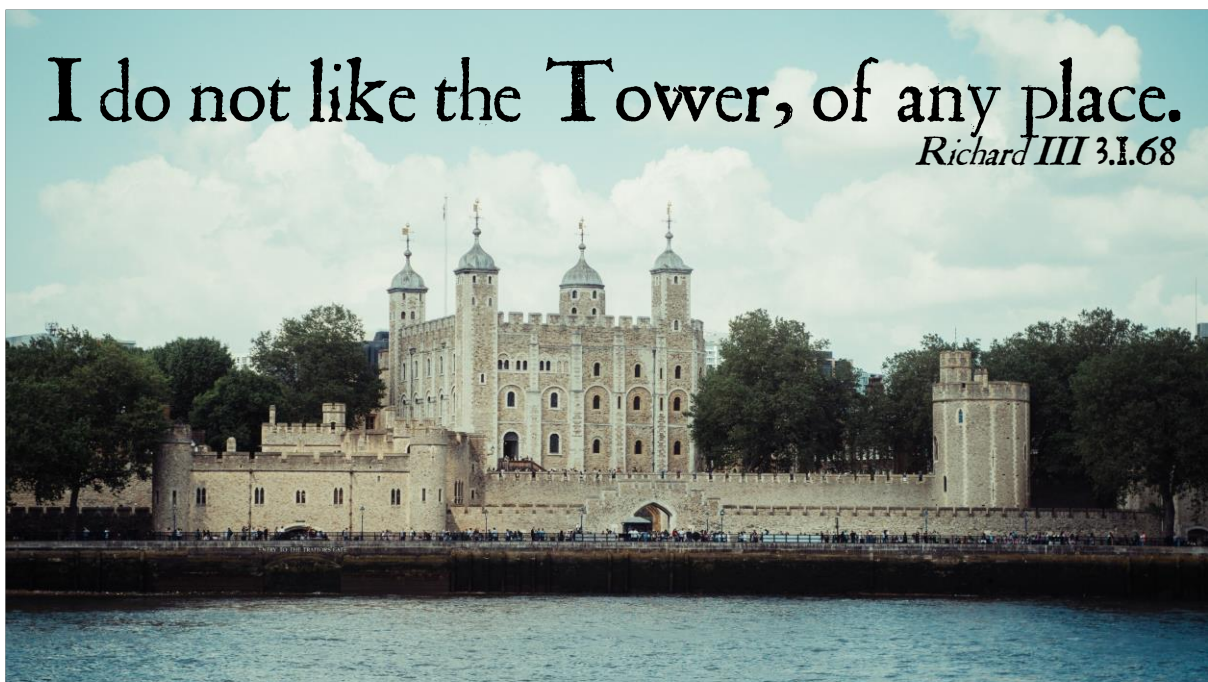


**Walsingham House Seething Lane
opposite St Olave's**

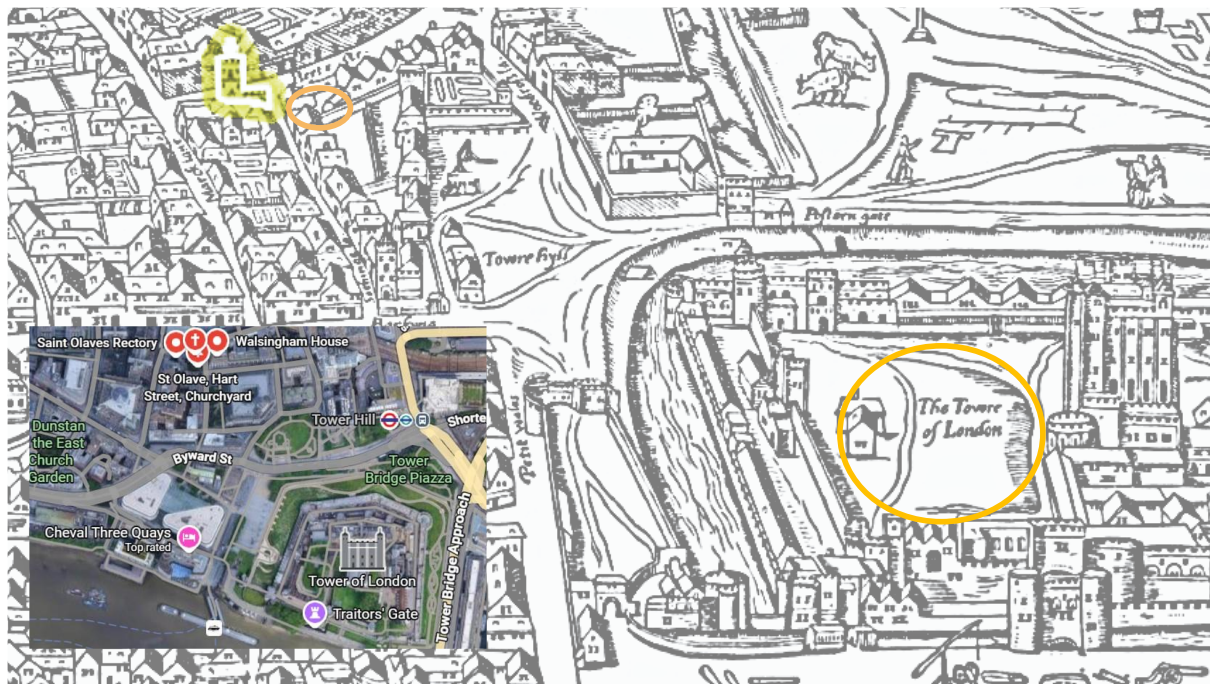
**SIR FRANCIS WALSINGHAM ELIZABETH'S I'S
'SPYMASTER'**



Directly across the street on Seething Lane stood the London house of Sir Francis Walsingham, Elizabeth I's spymaster. His Tudor mansion is long gone but today an office block named Walsingham House sits on the precise original location, so you can imagine how close to the espionage action the church was.



The foreboding Tower of London was minutes away; the river carried news, people, money and danger through the city.



If we compare the old Tudor map and a modern Google map, St Olave's, Walsingham House and The Tower are in close proximity and on exactly the same sites today, as they would have been in Tudor times.

Walsingham's agents, codebreakers, informants, household servants, merchants and officials all moved through this neighbourhood. St Olave's was their parish church: the everyday setting for baptisms, marriages, funerals and worship within a community tied to secret statecraft.

If we were sitting here in Tudor times, Sir Francis Walsingham may well have been close by with his household and servants. The church would have been busy with port workers, merchants, Tower officials and families moving through a parish where death, disease, trade and politics were part of daily life.

Between 1530 and 1616 St Olave's was served by rectors including John Johnson and John Simpson, who guided the church through the reigns of Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary I, Elizabeth I and James I. They ministered in a parish where religious change, civic life and intelligence work overlapped.

Walsingham's granddaughter Elizabeth, daughter of Frances Walsingham and Sir Philip Sidney, was baptised here in 1585. Anthony Bacon, diplomat, intelligencer and brother of Francis Bacon, was buried beneath the chancel in 1601. The church still holds reminders of people drawn into Walsingham's world, including the monument to Peter Capponi, an Italian merchant linked to his intelligence circle.

This was a high-stakes world of faction, religious fear and political uncertainty, where secrecy could be the difference between survival and ruin. The great mind of the time Francis Bacon captured the point in his essay *Of Counsel*: 'It is true there be some affairs, which require extreme secrecy.'



The other great mind of the Tudor and Jacobean period was Shakespeare. Two minds of a kind in fact. All the world's a stage he proclaimed! Like life itself, there is an incredibly theatrical dimension to espionage and statecraft.

Now you might be thinking what has Shakespeare got to do with ciphers, codes, espionage and the intelligence services. Shakespeare wrote at the very time period we are looking at today, and, as might be expected, reflected the period he wrote in. The Shakespeare plays are in fact full of the notions of espionage, surveillance, deception, secrecy, feigned madness, feigned affection, mistaken identities, errors, confusion, all part of life itself then and now. We shall see links with Shakespeare right up to the present day.



In many ways it was extraordinary that Elizabeth even became Queen, but she did and came to embody England's great representation of Protestantism. In a commendable piece of Tudor marketing, the Catholics had the virgin Mary, and the Protestants now had the virgin Elizabeth.

On the east side of St Olave's, there is a stained-glass window depicting Queen Elizabeth I standing with two tall bells at her feet. She held a thanksgiving service here at St Olave's on Trinity Sunday, 15 May 1554, while she was still Princess Elizabeth, to celebrate her release from the Tower of London just down the road. And no doubt the St Olave bells rang out once more when Elizabeth was crowned Queen 4 years later.

It is possibly difficult for us to imagine what a dangerous and brutal time this was and statistics can make us lose sight of the people behind the numbers. Safe to say there was much persecution, torture and execution of people of all religious persuasions. Religious wars raged across Europe, and many learned to greatly fear religious fanaticism and its destabilising influences.



Elizabeth's reign is often remembered through glittering images of learning, pageantry and national confidence. But beneath that surface lay a violent and anxious world of religious war, plots, exiled communities, informers, intercepted letters and fragile alliances.

When Elizabeth came to the throne in 1558, she appointed William Cecil as Principal Secretary and Nicholas Bacon as Lord Keeper. These brothers-in-law became two of the great architects of the Elizabethan Protestant state, and Francis and Anthony Bacon grew up inside that world of government, reform and danger because these men were their father and uncle.

England's spymaster Sir Francis Walsingham had been a good friend of Anthony and Francis Bacon's father Sir Nicholas. Walsingham, his wife Ursula and young daughter Frances had narrowly missed death at the Huguenot slaughter in Paris in 1572 when he was ambassador to France. On return to England, he became the Secretary of State and began to organise an extremely efficient secret service on the continent, involving agents, informers, couriers,

decipherers and double agents across France, Italy, Spain and the Low Countries, as well as Englishmen travelling abroad.

He hoped to see the Protestant cause triumph everywhere in Europe and his family's brush with death firmly focused his mind. His guiding principle was stark: *"I wish first God's glory, and next the Queen's safety!"*



Francis Bacon said, "Knowledge is Power" and knowledge is the lifeblood of espionage. Espionage's driving force is cryptography, secret communication, the encoding and decoding of codes and ciphers. The Bacon brothers Anthony and Francis are a central element to our story.

Born in 1561, Francis Bacon was a polymath. Father of modern science, philosopher, lawyer, parliamentarian, a writer and poet and a great mind of the period. He also had a lifelong interest and expertise in cryptology and his deep connections to codes and ciphers is well documented.

When he was just 15, he was sent to France to the Paris embassy on her Majesty's Secret Service. Paris was particularly valuable as a centre for information-gathering (both overt and covert) because of its strategic location, its relatively speedy access to London, and because the embassy in Paris was the linchpin of an intelligence-gathering operation carefully constructed by Sir Francis Walsingham.

Francis Bacon was highly skilled at inventing and breaking codes and ciphers, and it was here as a teenager he invented his bi-literal cipher similar in principle to binary code. Professor Bill Sherman, current Director of the Warburg Institute and Historian of Cryptography said that Francis Bacon's bi-literal cipher: "is credited with being the beginning of the digital age that leads to computers. . . Francis Bacon is the first one who's credited with developing this." We will have cause to return to Professor Sherman later.

15 YEAR OLD FRANCIS BACON IN PARIS - THE CENTRE OF EUROPEAN ESPIONAGE



Also working at the Paris Embassy with Francis Bacon, was friend and fellow Trinity College Cambridge scholar, the formidable decipherer and linguist Thomas Phelippes, later famous for breaking the Babington codes. When not in Paris, Phelippes was with Walsingham at his house on Seething Lane, coding, decoding and analysing secret communications. An integral element of Phelippes' prowess in cryptanalysis was his mastery of the various languages in which the European powers operated, French, Italian, Spanish, Latin and German. What Francis Bacon learned under Thomas Phelippes remained with him for the rest of his life.



Ambassador Sir Amias Paulet's 'copy book' provided an extraordinary insight into the world which Francis Bacon inhabited for three years as part of the embassy, revealing above all the sheer bulk of written work that the resident was expected to coordinate.

Everything had to be done to a strict deadline, the departure of the post, by which time all letters had to be drafted, converted into the relevant cipher (there were different ciphers for each recipient of sensitive information), and then copied into the copy-book for future reference.



Francis' elder brother Anthony was no less skilled in cryptography but for much of his life remained in the shadows. At the suggestion of his uncle Sir William Cecil and spymaster Sir Francis Walsingham and with the blessing of his brother Francis, Anthony formally applied for permission to travel abroad. The necessary papers were granted under the auspices of Cecil and Walsingham with the clear instruction he was to live among and ingratiate himself with Protestants and Catholics alike. He was to act as a link with other secret foreign agents in Walsingham's intelligence network throughout France, Italy, Spain, and the Low countries.

A protégée of Sir Francis Walsingham, Anthony became one of the most adept and well-connected intelligencers of the age. He built an incredibly diverse and important network including among his correspondents Henri, King of Navarre (afterwards Henri IV of France), essayist and philosopher Montaigne, scholar and theologian Theodore Beza and King James of Scotland.

Walsingham guided a young Anthony Bacon in his early field work in France. Walsingham of course had vast experience of human nature (as well as spies watching his spies) so it soon came to his attention that Anthony (who had a lifetime afflicted with gout) was overdoing the taking of physic – potions often derived from rhubarb and opium. Walsingham sent a letter to Anthony offering surprisingly modern advice about moderating drug use in favour of better diet and exercise:

"I have been informed you too easily and too often give yourself to the taking of physic, a thing

which as I have by experience found hurtful in myself, when I was of your years, so you shall find in time many incommodities, if you do not break it off. Your years will better wear out any little indisposition, by good order of exercise and abstinence, with some other little moderation in diet, than abide to be corrected by physic, the use of which altereth nature much, yea, maketh a new nature, if it be without great cause used in younger years."

Walsingham needn't have worried about Anthony's proclivity for 'physic' as he went on to become the key intelligencer of the period, gathering information from across Europe, handling the incoming and outgoing of intelligence through a vast spy network and having as his close correspondents some of the most powerful people of the day. Like his brother Francis, many of Anthony's letters and papers were written in cipher as the secrecy of his work and the times would demand. Many of Anthony's letters and papers are still at the Lambeth Palace Library in London and some remain undeciphered to this day.



Spies wrote in complex codes using mathematical symbols, zodiac signs, Greek letters and ciphers. Walsingham's office cracked these to read intercepted mail and also encoded secret information to be sent to watchers and intelligencers around Europe.

Walsingham employed specialists who could open wax seals, copy letters perfectly, and reseal them without a trace, allowing plots to develop until he had enough evidence to arrest everyone. The Bacon brothers' Cambridge friend Thomas Phellippes was particularly adept at forgery.

Espionage had a great degree of theatricality about it. Spies would assume different identities, create detailed legends and write letters mischievously under ghost identities. Often Walsingham's spies would assume the identity of Catholic priests in order to infiltrate and acquire intelligence.

One such Agent: "B.C." was an anonymous English spy in Rome and Paris. His mission was to monitor English Catholic exiles and Jesuit priests training abroad to secretly return to England and spark a rebellion. In 1583 he reports back to Walsingham (presumably as an undercover Jesuit priest):

“The English seminary priests at Rheims are preparing twelve of their number to depart for England under false names. They travel disguised as merchants and soldiers, carrying hidden rosaries, Popish books, and letters of rebellion. Their purpose is to stir up the Catholic gentlemen of the North to join with any foreign force that shall land. One Peter Shaw goeth by the name of 'John Williams' and passeth through the port of Rye.”



Both Anthony and Francis Bacon had a great love of the theatre. Francis arranging many of the masques and entertainments whilst studying law at Gray’s Inn. Anthony at one time, famously chose lodgings in the heart of theatreland in Bishopsgate. His lodgings were practically next door to the Bull Inn a well-known Elizabethan Playhouse featuring an open courtyard where travelling acting companies staged plays, making it one of the early playhouses of Shakespearean London.

Their puritan mother Lady Anne Bacon was scandalised and in 1594 wrote to Anthony to express her profound disapproval:

“The Bull Inne there with continual interludes has even infected the inhabitants with corrupt and lewd dispositions. I promise you, son, it hath run in my mind since with grief and fear for you and yours to dwell so dangerously every way so near a place haunted with such pernicious and obscene plays and theatres able to poison the very godly and, do what you can, your servants shall be enticed and spoiled. But your men overrule you and seek themselves and not you in deed when you over trust.

God bless you and keep you from evil.

Your Mother”



Hamlet's world is a globe defined by the omnipresence of espionage

Espionage has always had a theatrical dimension: disguise, assumed names, forged letters, surveillance, performance and betrayal. Shakespeare's plays were written in exactly this world, and *Hamlet* in particular feels like a drama of watching and being watched. Simon Critchley and Jamieson Webster write:

"Hamlet's world is a globe defined by the omnipresence of espionage, of which his self-surveillance is but a mirror. Hamlet is arguably the drama of a police state, rather like the Elizabethan police state of England in the late 16th century, or the multitude of surveillance cameras that track citizens as they cross London in the current age. Hamlet's agonised paranoia is but a foretaste of our own."

Life at the Elizabethan court was unstable, shaped by suspicion, surveillance, gossip, and rumour. Allegiances shifted quickly, and courtiers could move from favour to disgrace in an instant, from high office and splendour to humiliation and imprisonment in the Tower. Francis Bacon himself in a politically motivated downfall, went from Lord High Chancellor to being stripped of all office, fined and thrown in the Tower for several days.

In Shakespeare, *King Lear* offers a beautiful reflection on these uncertainties, as he speaks to his daughter Cordelia about the changing fortunes of court life:

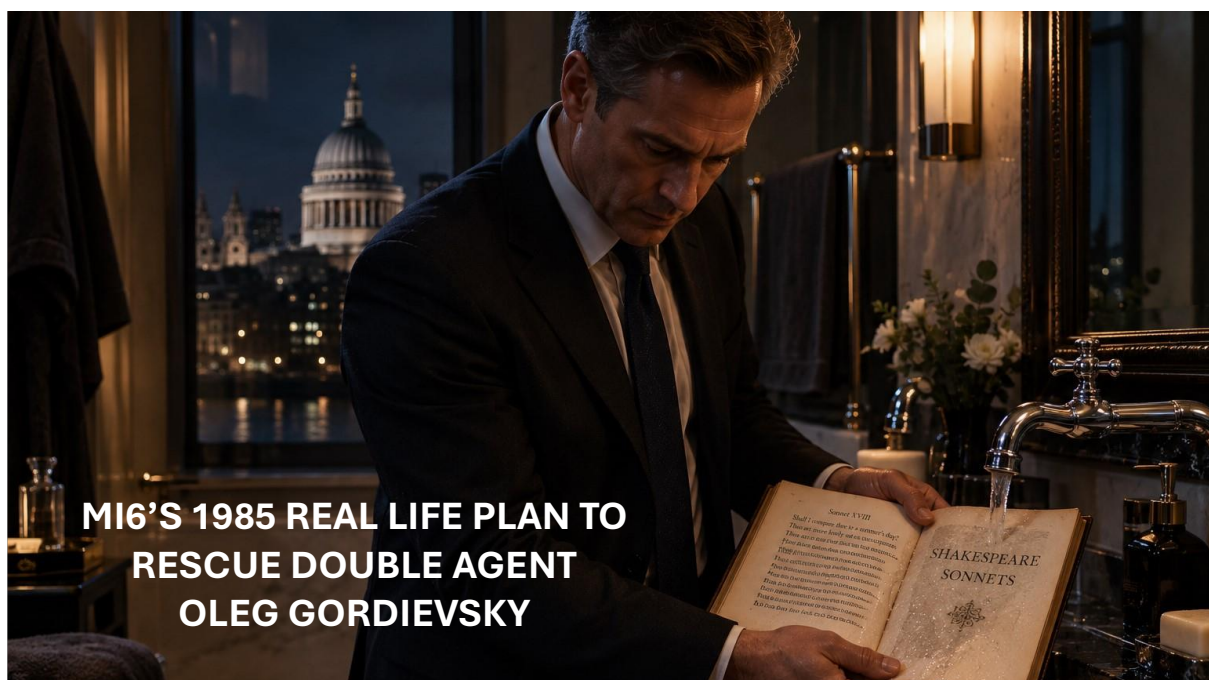
*"We two alone will sing like birds i' th' cage.
When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down
And ask of thee forgiveness. So we'll live,
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues
Talk of court news, and we'll talk with them too—
Who loses and who wins, who's in, who's out—
And take upon 's the mystery of things
As if we were God's spies."*



Interestingly Shakespeare often crops up in spy dramas and even in documentaries. Netflix's recent *Spy Ops* docu-series lets legendary former spies lift the curtain, to some extent at least.

But in "Operation Pimlico," the real star is Shakespeare: a book of sonnets transformed into a lifeline.

Like a James Bond twist, MI6's 1985 real life plan to rescue double agent Oleg Gordievsky began not with a gadget, but with poetry.



Hidden on his shelf, Shakespeare's sonnets held Gordievsky's secret emergency extraction instructions inserted by MI6 years before. He soaked the pages, peeled them back, and revealed a cellophane map to freedom.

Guided by Shakespeare's concealed message, he slipped his KGB tail, reached the Finnish border, and vanished inside a British diplomatic car.



Returning to the origins of the secret service: in 1585, Anthony Bacon sent a dispatch from south-west France to Nicholas Faunt, Walsingham's secretary. It recorded the religious wars and shifting loyalties in France, and the threat they posed to England. 45 refers to Walsingham, this is his cipher:

"Right Honourable,

My duty in humblest manner remembered. Since my last advertisement from Montauban, the face of affairs in these parts altereth daily, and the malice of the Catholic League under the Duke of Guise doth manifest itself more openly against the King of Navarre and the religion.

It is here secretly given out by certain merchants arriving from Bordeaux that a secret courier from Spain hath lately passed through Monseur de Mayenne's camp, bearing great sums of pistoles to corrupt the captains of the Gascon frontier. I have laid watch upon the roads by means of an English merchant of my acquaintance, to intercept such packets as may drop from their messengers, that we may tread out their hidden devices.

The King of Navarre remaineth constant and resolute, yet his necessities are great and his forces marvelously distracted. He professeth a most tender affection toward Her Majesty, our Sovereign, and repositeth his chiefest worldly hope in her princely succour.

I pray you, let 45 know that the French King's intents are highly ambiguous; he floateth between fear of the Guises and hatred of the Reformed churches.

I continue here in great infirmity of body, being grievously handled by the gout, which keepeth me a prisoner to my couch, yet my mind and pen shall never cease to travail in Her Majesty's service so long as breath remaineth. Tom Lawson, my servant, conveyeth this packet at great hazard. I beseech your Honour to cast a favourable eye upon his dispatch and to assist my present extreme want of funds, without which my intelligence must needs fall to the ground.

Thus praying for your long and happy health, I humbly take my leave.

From Montauban, this 12th of September.

Your Honour's always to command,

Anthony Bacon"



During her reign there were said to be over one hundred attempts on Elizabeth's life. Keeping her and the state safe was certainly a full-time job for agents of the crown. Codes and ciphers as we have seen formed the basis of many a plot. In 1586, the Babington Plot to assassinate Queen Elizabeth was now developing and about to be discovered by Sir Francis Walsingham which involved several key members of the English Secret Service.

The thwarted plan centred upon a series of enciphered letters passed between Mary Queen of Scots and her Catholic co-conspirators which were passed on to Sir Francis Walsingham via double agent Gilbert Gifford. Thomas Phelippes was responsible for deciphering the correspondence which ultimately sealed Mary's fate. On deciphering its contents on the outside of the letter Phelippes, who fully understood its import and implication, sketched a picture of the gallows that now awaited the Scottish queen.

Double agent Gifford writes to Walsingham:

"Babington and his confederates have resolved upon the dispatch of the Queen [Elizabeth]. They await only a certain sign from the Queen of Scots to strike. I have established a secure means to carry their letters in the corks of the beer casks, which the butler delivers weekly.

Every letter is brought first to Mr. Phelippes to be deciphered, copied, and resealed, so that the conspirators suspect nothing until the trap is fully sprung.”



Mighty Catholic Spain was a continual threat to small Protestant England and warranted permanent surveillance by Walsingham and his spy network.

In 1587 Agent Anthony Ashley Walsingham’s scout in Lisbon was sent to spy on the mobilisation of the Spanish Armada. He carefully counted ships, soldiers, and guns to give England an exact picture of the impending invasion force. He reported back to Walsingham with the very serious news of Spanish preparations to overthrow England:

“There are at Lisbon 60 great ships of war, besides 30 galleons and 40 smaller vessels. They carry 20,000 soldiers and 8,000 mariners, well provided with biscuit, wine, and bacon for six months. The talk among the Spanish captains is that they will sail for the English Channel by May, and they boast that England is theirs already. They have gathered vast quantities of iron cannonballs and leather water-bottles for the march inland.”

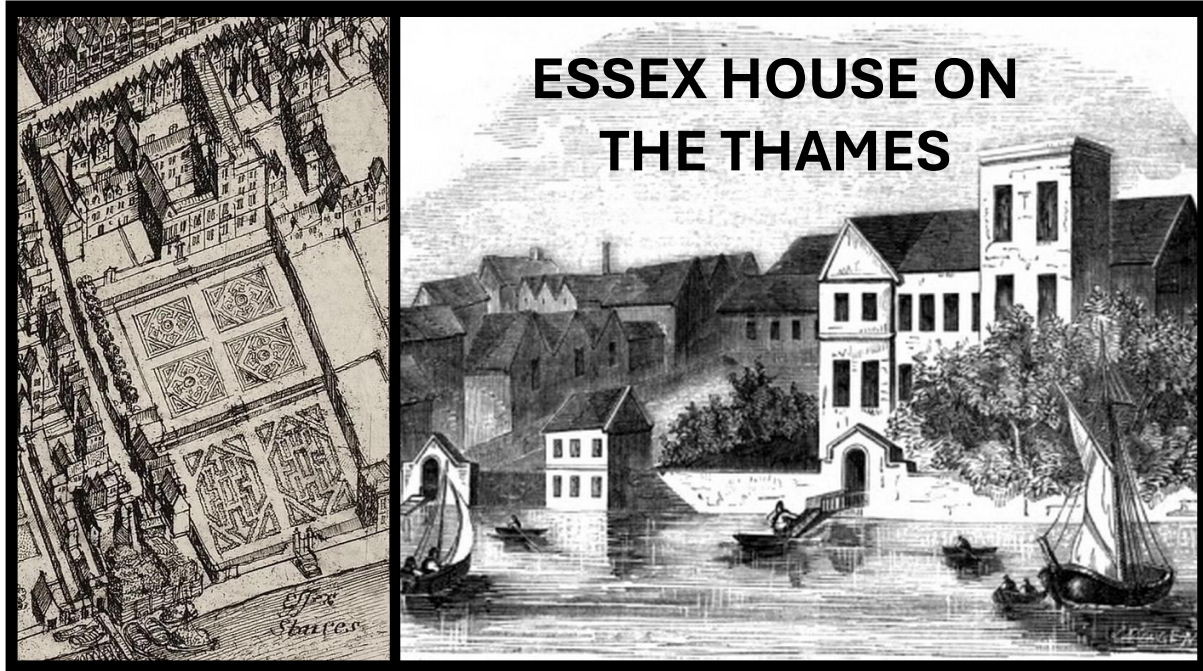
Ashley had rightly noted the Spanish preparations, and the following July the Spanish fleet was spotted off the coast of Cornwall. At the height of the battle on the 1st of August a besieged Sir John Hawkins wrote desperately to Walsingham from on board his ship the Victory:

*“Right Honourable,
I am sorry I have so little time to write unto your Honour. The fleet is here and very strong, and we must face it with all our force. I do not doubt but that God will give us a good day, but the enemy is a mighty power.*

We will need a great amount of gunpowder and cannonballs, and that with all speed, to save our country from danger. For the love of God, let us have them without delay! Our men have fought bravely and have done good service, but they have not been paid for a long time and need support. The money that should have gone to Plymouth may now be sent to Dover, for here is where the great weight of the business lies.

I pray your Honour to urge Her Majesty and the Council to remember our necessity, for the enemy is grand and our store is small. And so, in haste, I commit your Honour to the protection of the Almighty.

*Your Honour's always to command,
John Hawkins”*



Many intelligence letters of the period mention lack of funds. Whilst Queen Elizabeth spared no expense on her magnificent clothes, jewels, sumptuous banquets, entertainments and progresses, she was less generous when it came to funding the efforts of those who spent their lives in the pursuit of keeping her and the state safe. Walsingham financed much of this network out of his own pocket. So it was, in 1590 when he died over the road at Walsingham House, he was massively in debt despite running the most successful intelligence operation in Europe.

With Walsingham now gone, it remained for the men who had most experience and knowledge of the network to take over the mantle, and the responsibility for the English Secret Service passed to the Bacon brothers and Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex who was Walsingham's son-in-law.

The main hub of espionage activity now transferred to Essex House on the Strand just two miles up the river from the St Olave's, Walsingham House and the Tower.

Anthony Bacon had returned to England from many years in France and officially entered the service of Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex, serving as his private secretary. Life was fraught with danger and the ongoing threats of foreign invasion and political and religious intrigues continued as well as threats from within.

From Essex House, Francis and Anthony Bacon ran an extensive domestic and foreign intelligence network, with spies and informants operating across Europe. Essex served as a de facto foreign secretary, while the Bacon brothers effectively headed England's secret service, their modern counterparts being the heads of MI5 and MI6.

Working out of Gray's Inn and Essex House, Francis and Anthony Bacon also set up a literary workshop at Twickenham Lodge with connections to English printers and publishers employing writers, translators, scribes and copyists for distribution of private manuscripts, books, plays, masques and other entertainments.



Daphne du Maurier, former vice president of the Francis Bacon Society and Anthony Bacon's only biographer, called the Bacon brothers and Essex the "Golden Lads," after the funeral lullaby in Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*. The song reflects on life's fragility and death's equality, presenting death not as terror, but as safe harbour and release:

*"Fear no more the heat o' the sun,
Nor the furious winter's rages;
Thou thy worldly task hast done,
Home art gone, and ta'en thy wages:
Golden lads and girls all must,
As chimney-sweepers, come to dust."*

There are numerous letters between the Golden lads and their correspondence shifts from cold spy dispatches to a deeply intense, politically charged relationship. An urgent, late 1590s political letter from Anthony Bacon to the Earl of Essex, captures the desperation, financial instability, and court intrigue that preceded Essex's eventual downfall.

The reference to a baseline letter refers to the writing of an innocent letter about family news, health, or merchant trade. This acted as the "baseline" or cover story to satisfy any guards or post-interceptors who examined the mail. Between the lines of the baseline text, or on the blank back of the page, the spy would write the *actual* intelligence using either invisible ink or else incorporating a cipher.

Anthony Bacon to the Earl of Essex (17 May 1595):

"My Singular Good Lord,

Being not able, by reason of a sudden fit of my gout, to wait upon your lordship myself, I have sent my servant to present unto your lordship this enclosed baseline letter from an English merchant at Bayonne, who, as your lordship may perceive, is very well-affected, and contented to do your lordship service, if he might know how his advertisements might safely be conveyed. The news he writeth of the King of Spain's preparations, and the repair of the Duke of Guise to the court, do seem to concur with that which your lordship hath heard from other parts.

I humbly beseech your lordship to vouchsafe to read it, and to return it by this bearer, with some few words of your lordship's pleasure, what direction I shall give him for his future proceedings; for which, and all other your lordship's most noble favours, I shall remain during life,

*Your Lordship's most entirely devoted and humble servant,
Anthony Bacon"*

Essex replies to Anthony Bacon:

*"Sir,
I am sorry for your gout, but more sorry that it keepeth you from me.
I return you your baseline merchant's letter, and do think his offer of service very acceptable. I pray you encourage him to continue his advertisements, and let him know that he shall find his travels and hazards well rewarded. For the safe convoy of his letters, you may direct him to address them under a merchant's cover to your lodgings, or to my secretary Reynolds.
The news of the Spanish preparations doth agree with my other intelligences; yet I find the Queen and the Lords slow to believe or provide for that which is so openly threatened. I am now in a great maze at Court, being hourly importuned with businesses, yet finding little resolution in those that should direct them.
I pray you commend my love to your brother Francis, and believe that I am ever,
Your most assured and loving friend,
Essex"*

Meanwhile, Francis was handling affairs from his literary scriptorium in Twickenham. In this letter, Anthony uses his characteristic formal but affectionate tone, blending political developments with a direct plea for Francis to send him more state business and papers. In amongst affairs of state, his gout gets its usual mention, and we are reminded that this affliction occurs many times in Shakespeare plays with Sir John Falstaff famously stating that gout plays, "*the rogue with my great toe.*"

Anthony Bacon to Francis Bacon (1593):

*"Good Brother,
I am safely arrived here, where I find all things in the same state I left them, saving that the urgency of these dangerous times doth daily multiply our cares.
I have even now received letters from our friends in France, which contain matters of no small consequence touching the actions of the League and the King's purposes, the particulars whereof I intend to impart unto my Lord of Essex with all speed, as a matter most necessary for Her Majesty's present service.
I pray you, good brother, if you have any papers or instructions from the Court that may give light to these foreign advertisements, send them to me by this bearer, for the time requires our best and most vigilant diligence.*

My health remains after the old manner, much burdened with my accustomed infirmity, yet my spirit is ready to undergo what pains soever the service of our country and the love I bear you shall require.

And so, wishing you all comfort and prosperous success in your affairs, I commit you to the protection of the Almighty.

From my lodging, this 16th of April, 1593.

*Your most loving and assured brother,
Anthony Bacon”*

Francis Bacon writes back from the scriptorium at Twickenham Lodge:

“My good Brother,

Being now for a little sacrificed unto right and liberty, now that the Michaelmas term is ended, I have standard leisure to think of your health, which I pray God to restore and establish.

I have here an idle pen or two at your service, which I pray send me somewhat else for them to write, for my lodge at Twickenham Park is a place of good retirement, where I desire to pass my time as fruitfully as I may, and not in idleness.

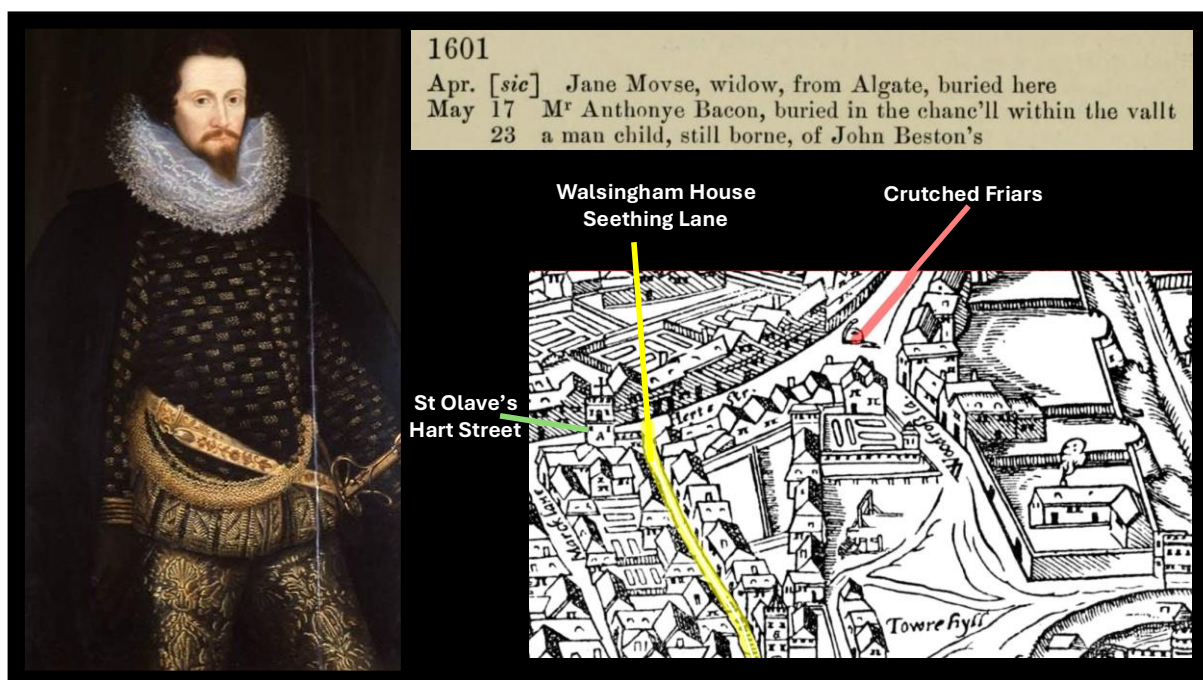
I would be glad to understand how matters go with you in the matter of your health, and what news you hear from the Court or from abroad touching our great business.

Thus, with my most hearty commendations, I commit you to the protection of the Divine Majesty.

From my lodge at Twickenham Park, this 25th of January, 1594.

*Your comfort and loving brother,
Francis Bacon”*

And so, life went on. Numerous plots against Queen Elizabeth were thwarted, and although Spain continued to threaten England, launching two further major armadas, England was never invaded, thanks in part to the effectiveness of the intelligence network run by the “Golden Lads.”



Aside from Francis, Essex was the one person in his life that Anthony Bacon was completely devoted to, and Essex's rebellion and subsequent execution on the 25th February 1601 must have caused heartbreak to an already ailing Anthony and he died less than three months later.

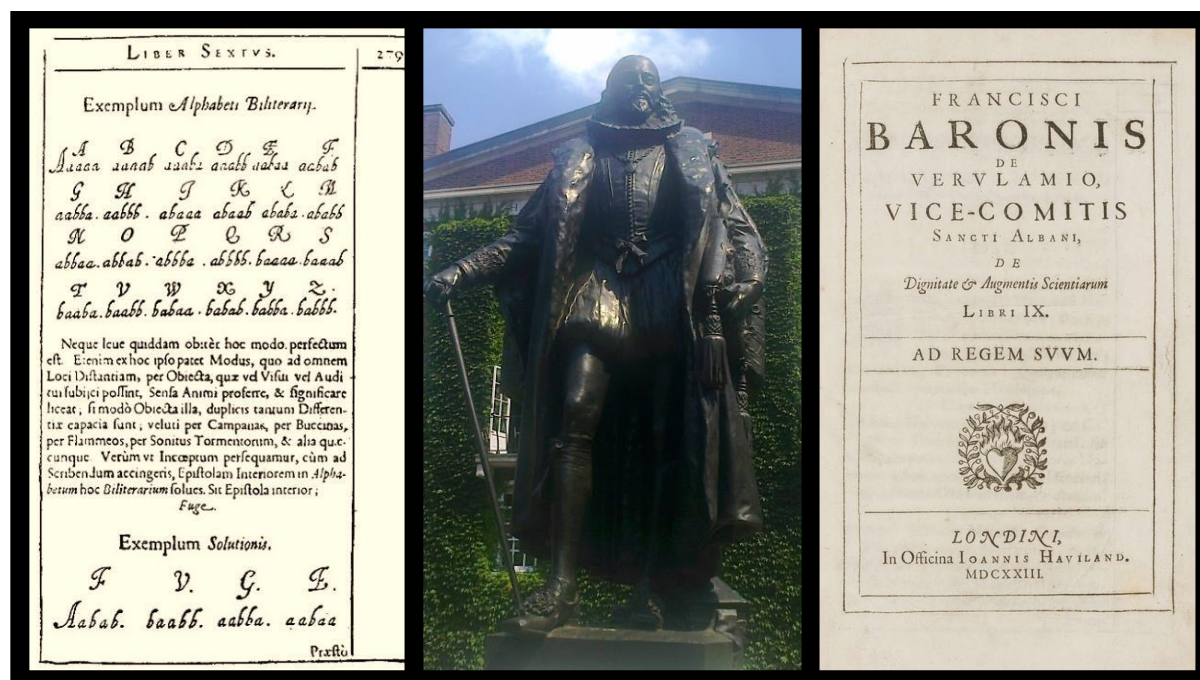
Sir Francis Walsingham had died penniless, and this was now the fate of Anthony Bacon who along with Francis had spent their own fortunes on state work and the publishing of works from their scriptorium. Bed bound and paralysed by pain which he had endured for most of his life, Anthony was living in a house in Crutched Friars around the time of his death, right by St Olave's Church and Walsingham House and one would hope with Francis by his side.

Little is known about Anthony's death or funeral. There is speculation that Anthony's former master's widow Ursula Walsingham may have helped financially.

Until 1975 nothing was thought to have been known about Anthony's final whereabouts, but when Vice president of our Society Daphne du Maurier was writing *Golden Lads* she uncovered at the British Museum the Harleian MS stating that he was buried at St Olave's, so she was the first to uncover this lost knowledge. It had though already been recorded in the *Annals of St Olave's, Hart Street*:

“1601, May 17. m^r Anthonye Bacon buried in the chancel. Within the vault.”

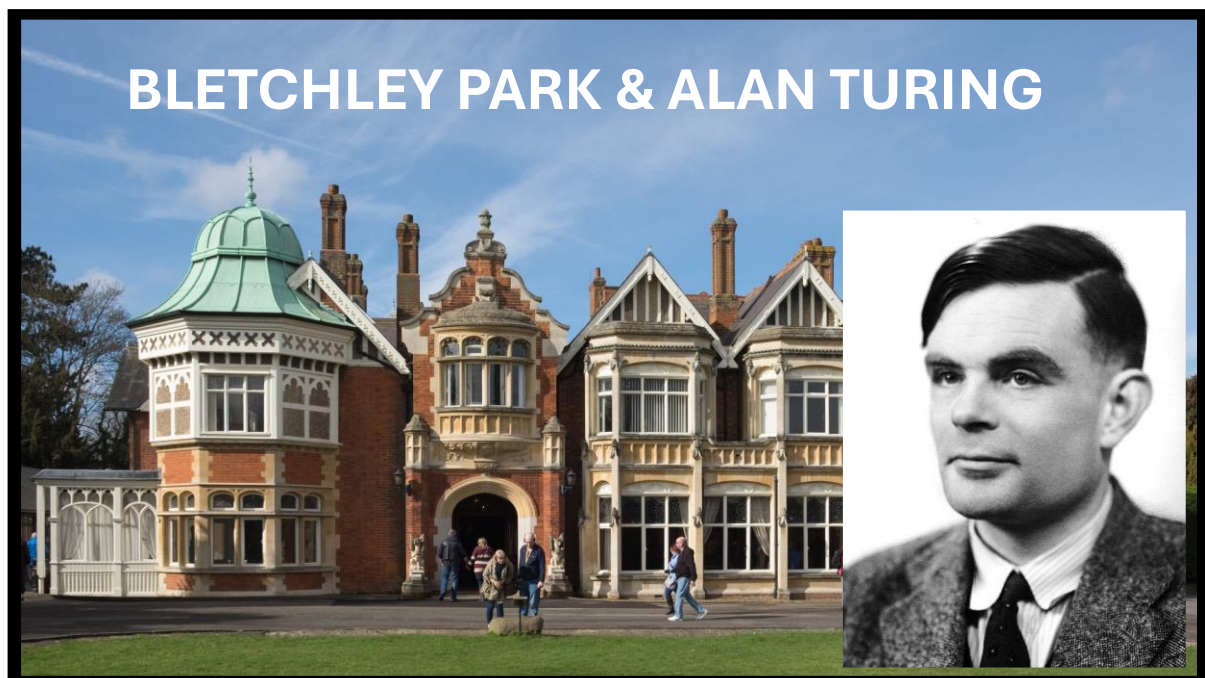
Fittingly considering Anthony's great love for music and lute playing, today St Olave's has a strong music tradition and offers recitals and musical interludes twice a week.



Francis Bacon lived until 1626 and in 1623, within days of the publication of the Shakespeare First Folio there appeared in Latin Bacon's truly monumental *De Augmentis Scientiarum* that included several pages outlining his cipher systems including an expansive and detailed explanation of his bi-literal cipher that was to have a major impact on posterity.

We have woven Shakespeare references and quotations throughout the evening, fittingly so: his works were born amid danger, surveillance, and the political upheavals of the Tudor and Jacobean worlds.

Roll on to the 20th century, and Shakespeare and Bacon crop up again in direct relation to ciphers, codes, Bletchley Park, NSA, World War 2 and eventually to the present day.



Alan Turing, mathematician, computer scientist, codebreaker, and wartime figure at Bletchley Park sits at the centre of a remarkable espionage lineage. His world of binary code, 1s and 0s, echoes Francis Bacon's 1623 bi-literal cipher, which proved that information could be hidden, transmitted, and decoded through combinations of just two signs. From Bacon's Elizabethan inheritance to Turing's machines, the logic is the same: secrecy reduced to a system.

At Bletchley Park, that old logic became urgent wartime machinery. Colossus, the world's first large-scale programmable electronic computer, drove Turing's binary principles at unprecedented speed, turning codebreaking into industrial-scale intelligence work.

Shakespeare enters the story through Turing's landmark 1950 paper, *Computing Machinery and Intelligence*, where Turing tests machine intelligence through a question rooted in Sonnet 18.

The point was not literary decoration. By asking whether a machine could respond meaningfully to Shakespeare, Turing turned poetry into an intelligence test: could a machine understand, deceive, persuade, or merely imitate?

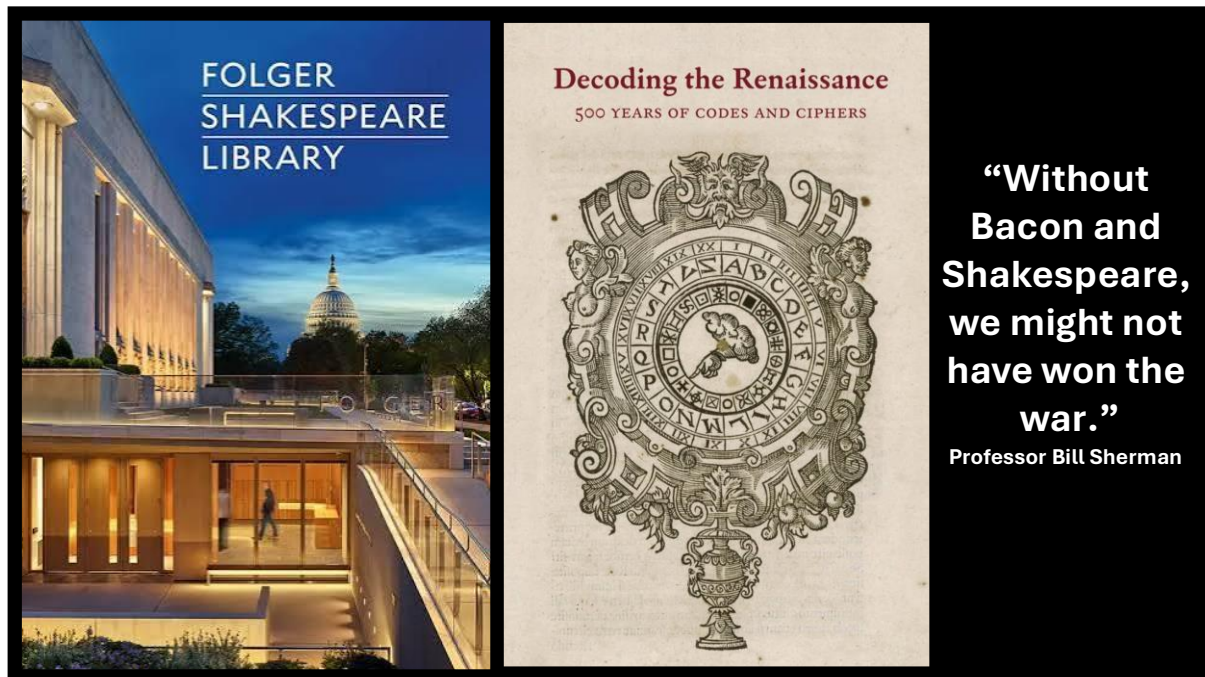
In his imagined interrogation game, a human judge questions the hidden respondent about Shakespeare's Sonnet 18, beginning with "*Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?*" and tries to decide whether the intelligence on the other side is human or machine.

For an espionage audience, the connection is striking. Bacon supplies the two-symbol code; Shakespeare supplies the human test of language and ambiguity; Turing fuses both into the modern question of artificial intelligence and machine deception.

Turing predicted that by the end of the twentieth century, machines would have enough speed and memory to perform convincingly in this "imitation game." After five minutes of text-based

questioning, he estimated, an average interrogator would have no more than a 70% chance of detecting the machine. Turing, though not mentioning the term was talking about Artificial intelligence.

He also foresaw a change in public imagination. By 2000, he argued, people would be able to “speak of machines thinking without expecting to be contradicted.” From Bacon’s cipher to Shakespeare’s sonnet to Turing’s test, the Elizabethan legacy leads straight into today’s debates about AI, surveillance, and intelligence.



Today, the Elizabethan world reaches directly into modern espionage. In 2015, the Folger Shakespeare Library held a major public exhibition called *Decoding the Renaissance: 500 Years of Codes and Ciphers*. It explored how the Renaissance was not only an age of mass communication, but also the birthplace of modern secret writing, diplomacy, and cryptography. Bacon’s bi-literal cipher featured and, in a podcast, Professor Sherman, now of the Warburg Institute, makes a striking claim: “Without Bacon and Shakespeare, we might not have won the war.”

In conversation with Rebecca Sheir, Professor Sherman shows how Renaissance secrecy, codes, ciphers, hidden messages and Francis Bacon’s ingenious cipher, fed the foundations of modern cryptography.

The bridge to today runs through William Friedman, the brilliant American cryptographer whose team broke Japan’s diplomatic code before the Second World War. Friedman’s path began in 1915 when he worked at Colonel Fabyan’s Riverbank Laboratories, a place dedicated to the search for Bacon’s cipher hidden in Shakespeare’s plays.

In 1993, the National Security Agency created a plaque honouring Colonel Fabyan and the Riverbank Cipher Department staff for their cryptologic contributions to the United States. It was presented to the current Riverbank Acoustical Laboratory and is now displayed in its museum.

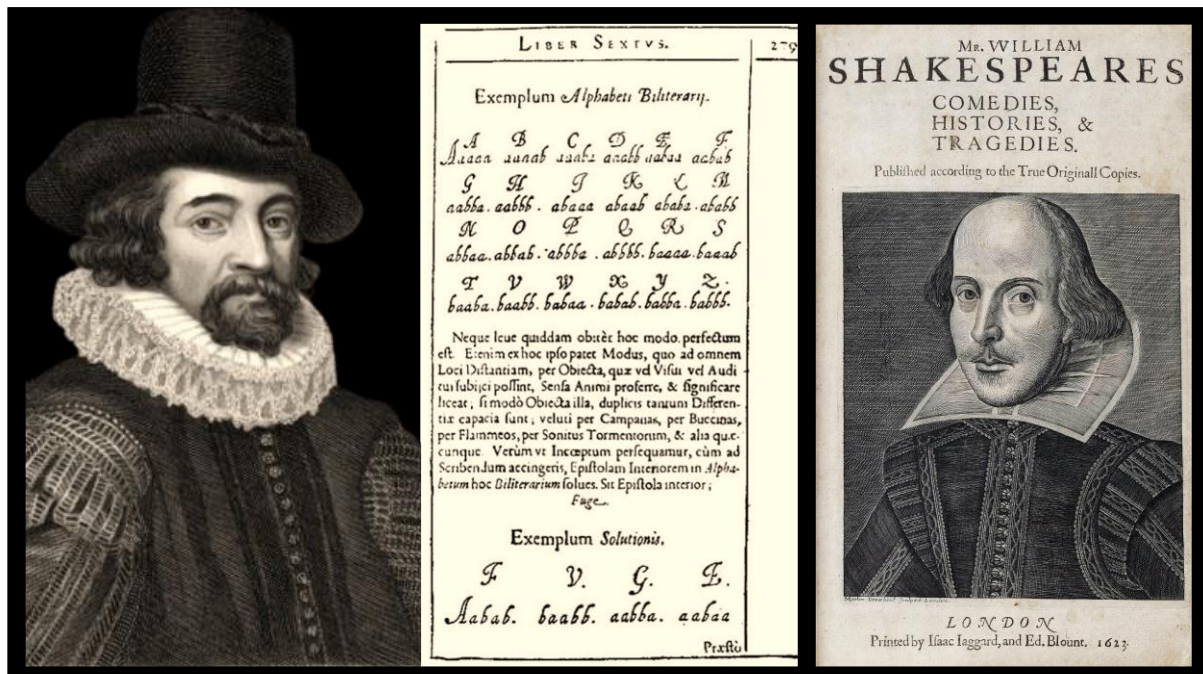
Today, the NSA regards Riverbank Laboratories as the birthplace of U.S. cryptology.

RIVERBANK LABORATORIES & WILLIAM FRIEDMAN



The 1918 photograph “Knowledge is Power” shows World War I cryptographers trained by William Friedman spelling Francis Bacon’s axiom with their bodies using his biliteral cipher

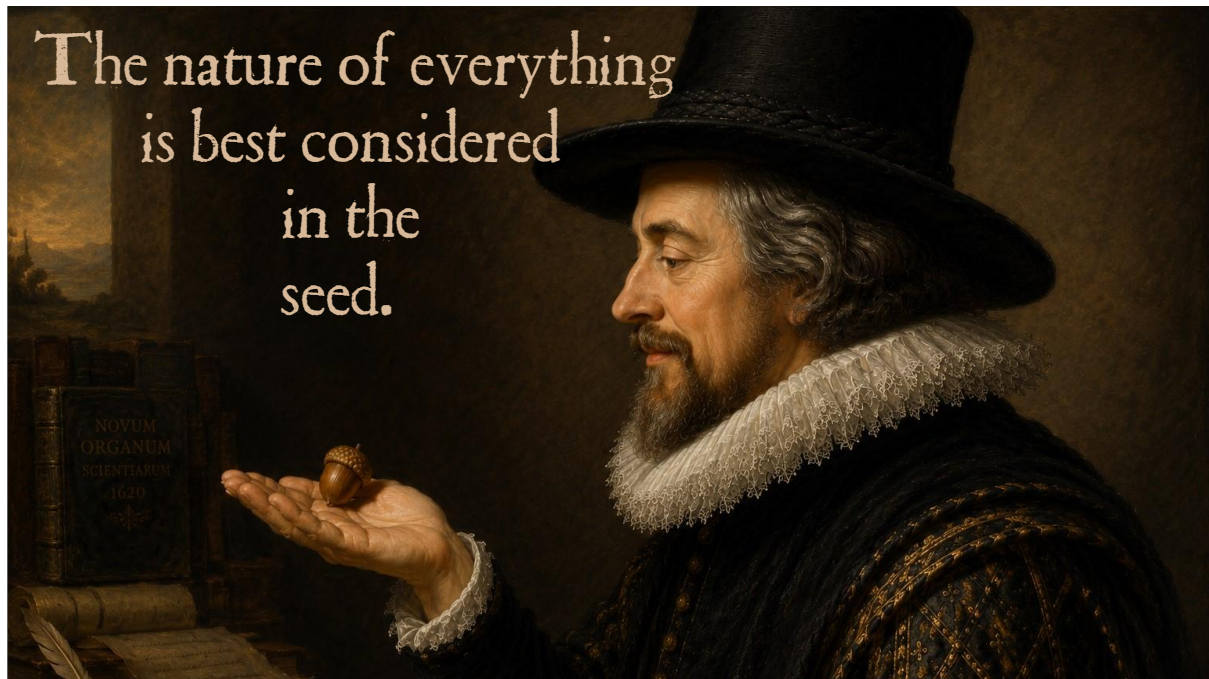
For Friedman, that early literary detective work became a launchpad. Friedman went on to help create modern American cryptography and served as the National Security Agency’s first chief cryptologist carrying forward techniques whose roots stretched back to the Renaissance. In that sense, Bacon and Shakespeare did not remain in the library; they entered the code room.



Professor Sherman’s point is that the Folger’s effort to reconstruct Shakespeare’s world inevitably opens onto a wider history of communication, concealment and power. Alongside the Library of Congress, the Folger now holds one of the world’s greatest collections of early books of secret communication.

The lesson for an espionage audience is powerful: today's intelligence systems may look digital and futuristic, but their logic has a deep Elizabethan inheritance.

Professor Sherman captures that continuity vividly. Friedman may appear wholly modern, connected to the world of the NSA and CIA, yet his imagination was sharpened by an almost *Alice Through the Looking Glass* encounter with the early modern past. The tools changed; the spy craft impulse did not.



Francis Bacon, philosopher and father of modern science, left us the aphorism: “The nature of everything is best considered in the seed.”

And so, as an oak is already encoded within the acorn, the world of modern espionage was already present in its first seed: secrecy, observation, deception, intelligence, and power.

That seed was planted here, in the streets around St Olave's, where Walsingham, the Bacon brothers, the Earl of Essex, and countless unnamed agents helped shape the first English secret service. From their coded letters and hidden networks grew the intelligence world we recognise today. The methods have changed; the impulse has not. The cipher has become the algorithm, the intercepted letter the surveillance feed, the Elizabethan spymaster the modern intelligence chief.

Espionage has changed its instruments, but not its purpose: to see first, know more, and act first. What began in ink, whispers, and sealed letters still shapes the world around us, only now, the shadows are digital, and the stakes are global.

So, when we speak of espionage today, we are not looking at something entirely new. We are in fact watching an old seed still growing.

Photos from the talk.

With many thanks to Revd. Phillip Dawson and all at St Olave Hart Street, London.





SAINT
OLAVE
HART STREET