

## *Bobby Shafto Nursery Rhyme*

Whitworth Hall, near Durham, is the home of the Duncombe Shafto family. They run a hotel there and in their website the literature says there is no evidence of any link between Bobby Shafto and Bridget Belasyse of Brancepeth Castle, also near Durham. It says there is no evidence he ever went to sea. And it suggests that the song was first written as a publicity/election campaign and extended later for the same purpose. So, the rumour that there is a connection requires further analysis.

Bridget was six years older than Bobby and they both lived very close to Durham City. They would have moved in the same social circle and the seclusion of County Durham would have provided plenty of opportunity over the years for them to get to know each other. Bridget was the only child of Sir William, who was MP (Member of Parliament) for Durham after his father, who is buried in Westminster Abbey. It looks as though her mother might, at the age of 21, have died when giving birth to Bridget. This would have left Bridget very lonely and isolated in Brancepeth Castle, especially when her father was in London; though the Aunts might have been living in.

The Shaftos were not politicians. They were merchants. But Bobby chose politics and succeeded Sir William Belasyse as MP for Durham. This took him on frequent trips to London and people probably opted to go by sea rather than undertake the highwayman-infested bumpy track. In London, Bobby got to know the Duncombe family in Grosvenor Square; in particular, Anne. Anne had ideas of her own and insisted that the family name be Duncombe Shafto after their marriage on 18 April 1774.

So Bridget died just twelve days before the marriage. It might have taken a few days to trek to the coast and sail down to London. Bridget may well have tried to convince herself that it wasn't true and that he would come back to marry her. She may have launched a Diana-style appeal to dissuade Bobby from going through with it.

After the marriage, Bobby became MP for Downton in Wiltshire. Did he fall out of favour with the people of Durham? After all, their interests had been faithfully served by the Belasyse family for three or four generations and the links of Belasyse with Durham were far superior to any the Shaftos could muster. I am not sure Anne would have been happy with this outcome. She would have had plans for the Duncombe Shaftos at Whitworth Hall. She died ten years later at Downton.

There would appear to be some romantic substance to the nursery rhyme and a link with the Belasyse family. It is very likely that Bridget's heart was sorely broken by Bobby's decision to sail to London. It is difficult to surmise the original lyrics of the rhyme, but if they contained the news that "Bobby Shafto's getting a bairn", it would beg the question, whose baby was it? If Bridget was expecting Bobby's child, then the rhyme would have been broadcasting a matter of honour, in the first instance, and a lesson for all in the nursery thereafter.

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