

JOHN SECKERSTON:  
The Earl of Derby's Bearward

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Although not as common as is the case with companies of players, it is not unusual in the sixteenth century to find bearwards being sponsored by members of the gentry or nobility, from the King or Queen down to local landowners. *REED: Cheshire* so far has entries for the King's Bears, Lord Strange's Bears, the Lord Warden's bearward, Sir John Hollenofte's bearward, Mr Haughton's bearward, and Mr. Trafford's bearward, as well as the bearward of the town of Northwich and numerous other named individual bearwards. Bearwards tend to be identified either by name or by patron, but not both, and in general it is very difficult to match a sponsored bearward with a named individual. One might suggest that Peter Broome of Northwich, bearward, who appears in the records several times, could be the 'bearward of Northwich' mentioned in the Congleton accounts, as it is not clear that this designation denotes official status, or just place of origin. That his other appearances in the records generally have to do with complaints about him and his bears (including that they have killed people) suggests that his status as official town bearward, if he had it, was not a secure one.<sup>1</sup> Other individual bearwards seem to have led a similarly precarious existence, paid well in some places, set in the stocks in others.<sup>2</sup> The protection of a great magnate would improve the bearward's chances of escaping the latter, and receiving the former treatment.

To the people keeping the accounts the identity of the bearward's sponsor was of more concern than the identity of the bearward. It is therefore particularly interesting to find the Earl of Derby's bearward named as John Sekerston, Sakarston, or Sackerson in no less than three separate *REED* volumes, *Lancashire*,<sup>3</sup> *Bristol*,<sup>4</sup> and *Coventry*.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the name 'John Sekurton' appears in *REED: Shropshire* for 1553–4 and that of 'Sekurton the berward' in 1559–60, although it is not clear that he is the Earl of Derby's bearward at this point.<sup>6</sup> In the material being collected for the *Cheshire* volume of *Records of Early English Drama*, John Seckerston appears as the innkeeper of the Bear Inn in Nantwich who kept bears in his stable in 1583,<sup>7</sup> and was also involved in selling a bear cub sometime around 1564.<sup>8</sup> In addition to these named appearances, there are also appearances elsewhere by the Earl of Derby's bearward, which do not

identify him by name. Some, although not all of these may be associated with John Seckerston.

To deal first with the three named appearances of the Earl of Derby's bearward; it is particularly fortunate that the three entries all clearly refer to the same individual. The first mention comes from the annual audit in the *Liverpool Town Book 2*, dated 1 December 1574:

more paid by the wythin named Thomas Bastwell late bailiff  
to Iohn Sekerston The Erle of darbie our good Lords  
beyreward vj s viij d.

REED: *Lancashire* 41

There is nothing surprising in the Earl of Derby's bearward appearing in Liverpool, but the next mention of John Seckerston comes from further afield, from Bristol in 1579–80:

Iohn Sakarston my lord of darbies Bereward for offring his  
Bearse to be cowrsd before master Mayer who had no leysure  
To se the game but commaunded to pay him v s.

REED: *Bristol* 120

Seckerston is also named as the Earl of Derby's bearward in Coventry in 1584, when the Chamberlains' and Wardens' Accounts list a payment:

to Sackerson the Earle of darby his bearward xiiij s iiij d.

REED: *Coventry* 302

This 'Sackerson' must be identified, or at the very least connected, with the John Sekerston or Sakarston of the earlier records. This probability is heightened by the fact that the Earl of Derby's bearward appears regularly in the Coventry accounts, appearing first in 1574, the date when it is known that John Sekerston was the Earl of Derby's bearward in the Liverpool accounts. He appears five times from 1574 to 1582, designated only as 'the Earl of Derby's bearward', receiving 5s. in 1574 and 10s. at each of the other four appearances. The payment of 13s. 4d. in 1584 is the highest payment which he received, and there is thereafter a gap in the records until 1597, when the Earl of Derby's bearward again receives 10s., as he does in 1599. Payments and appearances both drop off, with only two more entries, for 1601 and 1616, receiving 3s. 4d. each time.<sup>9</sup>

The question therefore arises, for how long was John Seckerston the Earl of Derby's bearward, and is the Earl of Derby's bearward to be identified with John Seckerston of Nantwich? Mentions of an Earl of

Derby's bearward are found as early as 1517–8, and continue throughout the century at irregular intervals.<sup>10</sup> Obviously no one individual could have been the Earl of Derby's bearward for the entire time. In *REED: Shropshire*, Alan Somerset identifies 'Sekurton the berward', to whom 10s. was paid at Shrewsbury in 1559–60, with both an earlier John Sekerton, paid 5s. without explanation in 1553–4, and the bearward of the Earl of Derby mentioned in Liverpool in 1574–5.<sup>11</sup> If this identification is accepted, and it is presumed that the 1553–4 expense was also for bearbaiting, then John Seckerston's active career as a bearward lasted at least thirty years. The Bailiffs' accounts for Shrewsbury, which are in Latin rather than English, list a payment in 1558–9 of 10s. 2d. 'dato vratori prepotentis vir Comitis Derby ad dua separalia tempora'.<sup>12</sup> The specification of the Earl of Derby here, rather than the name of the bearward, may be a reflection of the more elevated language of the Bailiffs' accounts, but it is also possible that John Seckerston at this point was not the Earl of Derby's bearward. The presumption is not as strong as that which links the Liverpool, Bristol, and Coventry entries.

That is not to say that it is out of the question for Seckerston's career as a bearward to have lasted thirty years or more. There is evidence that bearwards could continue in their occupation for a considerable time. Raphe Bowes was Master of the Queen's Bears and Mastiffs from 1572–3 until his death in 1598–9, although he seems to have been aided by other members of his family. His predecessor, Richard Dorrington, was Master of the Bears for fourteen years. Later Masters, such as Edward Alleyn, held the post for twenty years, but it is clear that Alleyn was not an active bearward, and acted mainly by deputy.<sup>13</sup> More active long-term bearwards can be seen in Cheshire itself, where the name Shelmerdyne appears from 1590–1 to 1623–4, a period of over thirty years, although it is not clear whether more than one individual of that name is involved. The possibility of a bearwarding family of Seckerstons, or of Shelmerdynes, like the Whystones of Ormskirk,<sup>14</sup> or indeed the Bowes of Paris Garden,<sup>15</sup> should not be overlooked. For a bearward to grow up in the family business, familiar with the bears and their ways, is likely to have been a common occurrence.

I now come to the Cheshire John Seckerston, who may or may not have been the Earl of Derby's bearward, indeed, may or may not have been a bearward at all, but was certainly involved in the care and raising of bears. That he was also a property owner and an innkeeper in Nantwich does not preclude him from having been a bearward, although I would

suggest that it increases the likelihood that he was the Earl of Derby's bearward, rather than a 'common bearward'. There are in fact two John Seckerstons in Nantwich to consider. In 1545, John Seckerston 'Sr.' was assessed in a Subsidy Roll at £10, based on the value of his property.<sup>16</sup> The amount is one of the higher ones on the list, and indicates that John Seckerston senior was a man of substance. That he is designated as 'Sr.' also indicates that he may be presumed to be the same John Sackerson who was the father of twin sons, Roger and John, baptised 28 March 1541. If the Sekurton of the Shrewsbury records is John Seckerston of Nantwich, then John Seckerston senior seems the more likely candidate. His son would only have been about twelve or thirteen in 1553-4 when the payment is made to an undesignated John Sekerton. This may not have been connected with bearbaiting at all. The later payment, to 'Sekurton the berward', could refer to the son, as he would by this time be at least eighteen years old. It is this son with whom I am principally concerned, as I take him to be the John Seckerston mentioned in later documents, and possibly the Earl of Derby's bearward as well. This second John Seckerston made his will on 20 December 1593, in which he is described as 'yoman', and he was buried on 9 July 1595.<sup>17</sup> If he was born in 1541, then by 1595 he would have been 54 years old, by no means an extreme old age, although he might be expected to be less active in the later years of his life, especially as he mentions being 'sicke in bodie' in his will. This ties in with the evidence from Coventry, where there is no mention of either John Sackerson or the Earl of Derby's bearward from 1584 to 1597.

John Seckerston is listed as one of the 'Gentlemen and Freeholders Resident in Nantwich' in 1579 (as John Secaston),<sup>18</sup> and in 1583, the year of the great fire of Nantwich, he was the innkeeper of the Bear Inn. The name is evidently not coincidental, as Thomas Wilbraham mentions in his diary description of the Great Fire not only a list of inns and their innkeepers (including the Ship, which was owned or run by another Seckerston, first name unspecified, but possibly John's twin brother Roger), but also that at the Bear

John Seckerston whoe having in his stable iiijor great beyres of his dyd lose theyme out in the beginning to the stretes wheroff the women were soe affrayed. They durst nott carrye water. Onlesse the were accompanied ^^with^ men hauyng wepons to deffende theyme ffrome the same beyres<sup>19</sup>

The reason for John Seckerston owning four large bears and keeping them in his stables must be in some way connected with bearbaiting. His involvement seems to have gone beyond merely providing entertainment. In 1578, William Wood, servant to Sir Richard Egerton, claimed, in a petition to the Earl of Leicester as Chamberlain of the County Palatine of Chester, that

About xiiijten yeres nowē past one Richarde Wood your orators brother dyd bye of one Iohn Seckerston of the Namptwyche within this countye Palatyne A yonge beare, & dyd agree to paye for the same to the said Iohn Seckerston iij li xiiij s iiij d at certen dayes then concluded vpon betwene them, for payment wherof one Thomas Byckerton late of Namptwyche aforesaid deceased (beinge nere kynsman to the said Richarde Woodde & to your said orator) dyd at the Request & desire of the said Richarde Woodde, become dettor to the said Seckerston, & dyd promysse & assume to paye the same money to the said Seckerston at the said dayes agreed vpon.<sup>20</sup>

The dispute is over whether or not the money was repaid to Thomas Bickerton before his death (which took place in 1571/2), and there is no further information about the purchase of the bear whelp. Fourteen years before December 1578 would place the buying of the bear whelp sometime in 1564, when John Seckerston would have been in his early twenties. If the Seckerstons were a bearwarding family, this entry could refer to John Seckerston senior, but it is not impossible that John Seckerston junior was able to either provide a bear cub or act as a middleman in the sale of one. The date of the sale would tie in well with the date given for Sekurton the bearward in *REED: Shropshire*, just as the later date of 1583 for the evidence of the bears in the stable links with the appearance of 'Sackerson' at Coventry in 1584. The fact that John Seckerston is identified by name, as well as by patron, in three separate cities, would support the hypothesis that he was a gentleman servant to the Earl of Derby. Nor is his or his father's wealth any reason why he might not be a bearward. Bearbaiting was at this period a lucrative business, as the involvement of businessmen such as Philip Henslowe and Edward Alleyn attests, and, like them, Seckerston may have been the 'master' of the bears, and left the more menial tasks to deputies.

John Seckerston's will, after arranging for the burial of his body and the payment of his debts, divides his goods and chattels into three equal portions. One share is left to his wife Margaret (who remarried on

22 March 1595/6 to John Church of Nantwich),<sup>21</sup> one share is divided between his two sons, Roger and John, and the final share divided between his two daughters, Margaret and Anne. The house in which John Seckerston lived, and all his other real property, was left first to his son Roger and his lawful issue, and then, in succession to his daughters Margaret and Anne, and their respective lawful issue, and finally, in default of any lawful issue of the other three children, to his son John.<sup>22</sup> This is unusual, as the general practice seems to have been for the sons to inherit before the daughters, but is explained by the fact that John the younger was baptised 27 December 1590, and was therefore only three years old when the will was written. John Seckerston evidently married twice, as there are four baptisms that are clearly his children: Roger (named after his twin brother, no doubt) in 1574, Margaret (named after his elder sister) in 1580, Anne in 1581, and John 1590. His marriage to Margaret Rutter took place on 8 February 1586/7, and there is earlier in that year (14 September 1586) a burial of 'Gwenn wife Jno Sackersonn'. This would be an additional reason for putting John the younger last in the line of inheritance, as the property rights of the first family are being safeguarded.<sup>23</sup>

John Seckerston was a wealthy man, by Nantwich standards, and some at least of his wealth was inherited, if the Subsidy Roll of 1545 can be used as an indicator of John Seckerston senior's wealth. He evidently owned more than one piece of property, as his will attests, mentioning 'the howse wherein I dwell & all & singuler other my messuages Cottages Landes tenementes & heriditamentes whatsoever within the realme of England'.<sup>24</sup> The phrase is formulaic, but it is a formula used by those who own land, and especially when there is more than one piece of land involved. The Inquisition Post Mortem of Richard Church held on 17 April 1593 mentions 'another rent of 5s. for one messuage in Nantwich called Preyers Hall, formerly in the possession of John Seckerston'.<sup>25</sup> After the fire of 1583, John Seckerston was assessed to pay £200 out of his own pocket for the repair of his property, and received a further £776 13s. 4d. from the relief fund. This is one of the higher sums in the list of payments from the Fire Appeal fund, with other inns like the Bell (paid £200, received £56 13s. 4d.) and the Crown (paid £240, received £68 6s. 8d.) contributing on a similar scale.<sup>26</sup>

All of this indicates the wealth and status of John Seckerston and the question might then be asked, would a man of this status be a bearward? The evidence from the Keepers of the Queen's Bears suggest that this is at

least possible. Much of Seckerston's wealth as an innkeeper might have derived from the presence of the bears, and his ability to provide entertainment to his guests. If the bear cub sold to Richard Wood was not unique, then his income could have been supplemented at intervals by the sale of bears. The fact that both Bristol and Coventry mention him by name suggests that he was of a higher status than most bearwards. The Bristol account is courteous in tone, apologetic that the Mayor 'had no leysure to se the game' but paying 5s. anyway. The Coventry payment of 1584, in which Seckerston is specifically named, is the highest payment to the Earl of Derby's bearward in their accounts (the usual sum is 10s.). This increased payment need not indicate that Seckerston was not also the Earl of Derby's bearward who received the earlier payments of 10s., as it could have been a form of charity after the Nantwich fire. In the same year, the Cappers' guild of Coventry made a payment of 5s. 'ffor the gyffe of nauntwetché',<sup>27</sup> indicating an awareness of the disaster and sympathy for its victims.

The unusual practice in three separate cities of actually naming the bearward as well as identifying his patron points to an individual of either higher status than usual, or of particular importance as a bearward. If John Seckerston was a breeder of bears as well as a bearward, he might well be more widely known than an ordinary bearward would be. Although proof of identity is always problematic in this type of case, there does seem to be a strong likelihood that the Earl of Derby's bearward can be identified with John Seckerston of Nantwich, innkeeper, man of property, and occasional purveyor of bears.

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## NOTES

1. London, Public Record Office, Ches 21/2, fol. 83<sup>r</sup> (21 September 1612); Ches 24/111/4, single sheet (1612), Ches 24/113/3, petition 9–10 May (1616), presentments (9–12 June 1616), petition (1 July 1616); Ches 21/3, fol. 29<sup>r</sup> (21 September 1618), fol. 58<sup>r</sup> (3 September 1621).
2. As happened to William Baxter, bearward, at Wilmslow: see Cheshire Record Office, Quarter Sessions Files, QJF 58/1/37, single sheet, 10 April 1629. For a discussion of the rewards paid to bearwards in Congleton, see Elizabeth Baldwin, "Selling the Bible to pay for the bear": the value placed on entertainment in Congleton 1584–1637' in *The Middle Ages in the North-*

- West* edited Tom Scott and Pat Starkey (Leopard's Head Press, Oxford, 1995) 257–67.
3. *Records of Early English Drama: Lancashire* edited David George (Toronto University Press, 1992).
  4. *Records of Early English Drama: Bristol* edited Mark C. Pilkinton (Toronto University Press, 1997).
  5. *Records of Early English Drama: Coventry* edited R.W. Ingram (Toronto University Press, 1981).
  6. *Records of Early English Drama: Shropshire*, 2 volumes, edited J.A.B. Somerset (Toronto University Press, 1994) 204 (John Sekerton, 1553–4, 5s.); 206 (Sekurton the bearward, 1559–60, 10s.).
  7. Chester, Cheshire Record Office, DDX 210/1, Wilbraham Diary, fols 3<sup>v</sup>–5<sup>v</sup>, 10 December 1583.
  8. London, Public Record Office, Ches 16/3, fol. 1<sup>r</sup>, Pleadings, 6 December 1578; fol. 1r. Interrogatories 1578/9; fols 2<sup>r</sup>–3<sup>v</sup>, Examination of Witnesses, 19 March 1578/9. The dates refer to the date of the documents, not the selling of the bear cub.
  9. *Records of Early English Drama: Coventry* 302 (named as Sackerson, 1584); 265 (1574), 269 (1575), 286 (1578), 290 (1579) and 298 (1582), 348 (1597), 353 (1599), 358 (1601), 397 (1616).
  10. See *REED: Shropshire* 174 (1517–18), 190 (1532–3), 196 (1537–8), 199 (1542–3) and 206 (1558–9); *Records of Early English Drama: Herefordshire Worcestershire* edited David N. Klausner (Toronto University Press, 1990) 527 (1534–5); *Records of Early English Drama: York* edited Alexandra F. Johnston and Margaret Rogerson (Toronto University Press, 1979) 330 (1559); *Records of Early English Drama: Newcastle-upon-Tyne* edited J.J. Anderson (Toronto University Press, 1982) 39 (1564).
  11. *REED: Shropshire* 383, 661.
  12. *REED: Shropshire* 206.
  13. *Dramatic Records in the Declared Accounts of the Treasurer of the Chamber, 1558–1642* edited David Cook and F.P. Wilson (Malone Society Collections 6: Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1961, 1992), biographical notes, 125 (Alleyne), 127 (Bowes), 130 (Dorrington).
  14. *REED: Lancashire* 72–4.
  15. The *Declared Accounts* mention Thomas and Edward Bowes in connection with bearbaiting during Raphe's mastership. It is possible that Thomas and



Edward were his sons, and acted as his deputies. See Malone Society *Collections* 6 8–25. Both Thomas and Edward are at various times described as ‘master of the game at paris garden’.

16. James Hall *A History of the Town and Parish of Nantwich* (E.J. Morten, Manchester, 1883) 98.
17. Chester, Cheshire Record Office, WS 1595, John Seckerston of Nantwich; P 120/4525/2, Nantwich Parish Registers, Burials.
18. Hall *Nantwich* 103.
19. Chester, Cheshire Record Office, DDX/210/1, Diary of Thomas Wilbraham, fols 3<sup>v</sup>–5<sup>v</sup>, 10 December 1583.
20. London, Public Record Office, Ches 16/3, fol. 1<sup>r</sup>, Pleadings, 6 December 1578.
21. Hall *Nantwich* 446.
22. Williams *English Historical Documents* 653.
23. Williams *English Historical Documents* 657.
24. A.G. Dickens *The English Reformation* (Batsford, London, 2nd edition 1989) 124.
25. Sir Thomas More ‘Dialogue Concerning Heresies’ in *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More* edited Thomas Lawler, Germain Marc’hadour, and Richard Marius (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1981) 6:1 303. See also Christopher Haigh *English Reformations* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1993) 58.
26. Jeremy Lake *The Great Fire of Nantwich* (Shiva Publishing, Nantwich, 1983) Appendix I, 153–4. The amount paid and received reflects not only the wealth of the individual, but also the amount of damage to the property. The Cock Inn, owned by Edward Minshull, mercer, only paid £60 and received £25.
27. Stratford-upon-Avon, The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, Cappers’ Account Book I, c. 1485–1925, fol. 122<sup>v</sup>.