

A Brief History of the King's Printing House (KPH) in the Jacobean Period

In the Jacobean period the King's Printers were Robert Barker (1570–1645), and the two Shropshire men, Bonham Norton (1564–1635) and John Bill (1576–1630). At this time the office of the King's Printer included the privilege to print the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer in English. John Norton (1556/7–1612), Bonham's cousin held a quite different patent, to the office of King's Printer in Latin, Greek and Hebrew from 1603 until his death in 1612, when his rights to the office passed to Bonham Norton. But the rights to the office of King's Printer in English were in dispute, and Robert Barker, Bonham Norton and John Bill—who held the office either alone, or together in various partnerships from 1603–1645—fought bitter legal battles in the Court of Chancery for more than a decade to establish their rights to a share in the business.¹

Robert Barker held the office of Queen's/King's Printer in English from 1593, through a reversionary patent first assigned by Queen Elizabeth to his father Christopher Barker senior.² Even though Robert Barker had manor houses and landed interests with valuable rents to support his family he was greatly in debt, partly due to costs incurred through the printing of the Authorized Version of the Bible in 1611.³ In 1615 he assigned houses and lands to Bonham Norton and John Bill as security in lieu of debts.⁴ These debts became entangled with the KPH when, in 1615, for the sum of £5000 Robert Barker entered into a three-way KPH partnership with Bonham Norton and John Bill on behalf of his son, Christopher Barker. This three-way KPH partnership followed Christopher's marriage to Bonham Norton's daughter, Sara, in 1615, and ran until 1617 when Robert Barker assigned his present *and* future interests in the KPH to Bonham Norton and John Bill alone for the sum of £6,500.⁵ Under Barker's management the KPH lacked investment and had no stock of books belonging to the office, but Bonham Norton and John Bill invested heavily in the office, and as Bonham Norton was, from 1613, King's Printer in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, the two offices became entangled politically and financially.

¹The documents with references beginning with C..., are all in the National Archives and transcriptions can be found on this website. For a detailed account of the fight in Chancery between the King's Printers, which involved double-dealing, cheating, assault and bribery, see Maria Wakely, 'Printing and Double-Dealing in Jacobean England: Robert Barker, John Bill, and Bonham Norton', *The Library*, 8.2 (June 2007) 119–53; see also Henry R. Plomer, 'The King's Printing House Under the Stuarts', *The Library*, 11.2 (1901), 353–75.

² C66/1630/memb. 22–3; See Arnold Hunt, 'Book Trade Patents, 1603–1640', in *The Book Trade and its Customers, 1450–1900*, ed. by Arnold Hunt, Giles Mandelbrote and Alison Shell (Winchester, 1997), pp. 27–54, p. 41.

³ For a detailed discussion of the financing of the Authorized Version, see John Barnard, 'The Financing of the Authorized Version, 1610–1612: Robert Barker and "Combining" and "Sleeping" Stationers', *Publishing History*, 57 (2005), 5–52.

⁴ C2/JASI/N4/57. Bonham Norton and John Bill agreed to be bound with Barker to some of these debts through their 1615 KPH assignment. One of Barker's debts was inherited by Bonham through an old account of John Norton, and may have dated to 1611 when Barker printed the Authorized Version and John Norton purchased stock from him. This debt was passed to Bonham Norton as he was the executor of John Norton's will.

⁵ See C2/JASI/B17/56.

Furthermore, through John Bill's good managing of the business (which drew in overseas investments through his Continental contacts) the office began to pay. These Continental contacts emerged from a joint-stock partnership which Bonham Norton, John Norton, and John Bill had set up in 1603. This long-running partnership, from 1603-1619 was designed to import continental books and stationary, and to produce books at home and abroad.⁶ It operated through an intricate web of book-trade contacts and markets, which John Bill was able to draw into the operation of the KPH. The KPH institutions extended their power as instruments of cultural production in Jacobean England. James's desire to define a national culture and influence European thought through the printed word meant that the Salopians' book-trading became as important culturally for the king as it was financially for the partners.⁷

In May 1618, conscious of the profits to be made by the KPH, Robert Barker wanted the business back, or financial compensation, claiming he had only assigned the office to Norton and Bill on trust for money they had loaned him. There followed a Chancery Petition from Robert Barker against Norton and Bill⁸, for the reassignment of the patents, assets and profits of the KPH which led to cross-petitions from Norton, and the involvement of successive Lord Chancellors and even the king, James I. In May 1619 Barker obtained a Chancery decree in his favour from the Lord Chancellor Francis Bacon.⁹ Bacon ordered Bonham Norton to reassign his share of the KPH to Robert Barker while Barker was ordered to repay to Norton what he owed. John Bill was found to be a *bona fide* purchaser of the KPH, a finding which may have been 'grounded vpon a reference from the Kings Ma^{tie}' to the Lord Archbishop.¹⁰ Bill also presented Chancery petitions against Norton in a bid to defer paying Norton money he owed, while defending his position as King's Printer.¹¹ Bill continued to enjoy the protection of James I and managed to hang on to his share of the office, partly due to 'extra iudiciall' references from the king until his death in 1630, when his share passed to his son John Bill junior.¹² But Robert Barker was still short of money in 1619 and was unable to fulfil the conditions as laid down by Francis Bacon's 1619 decree in Chancery, and so he and Norton came to various short-lived accommodations and agreements over the rights to

⁶ See C3/334/73 & C5/592/24.

⁷ In the five-year period from 1616 to 1620 the individuals who were (or claimed to be) the King's Printers were involved in the creation of a national politics through their production of a unique, unprecedented, and rather expensive series of folio editions of works, which were intended to influence European thought in fundamental ways. There were nine elite folios printed in this five-year period, many of them financed by John Bill, and they are inseparable from the story of the KPH under James I. They were James's *Workes* (1616/7) and *Opera* (1619); the first two parts of Marc' Antonio de Dominis's *De republica ecclesiastica* (1617 and 1620); Paolo Sarpi's famous *Historia del concilio Tridentino* in Italian (1619), English (1620), and Latin (1620); Henry Savile's edition of Thomas Bradwardine's *De causa Dei* (1618); and Francis Bacon's *Instauratio magna* (1620). For a detailed account see Maria Wakely and Graham Rees, 'Folios Fit for a King: James I, John Bill, and the King's Printers, 1616-20', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 68 (2005), 467-95.

⁸ C2/JASI/B17/56.

⁹ C33/135/1354-6.

¹⁰ C2/JASI/N7/44.

¹¹ C5/592/24; C3/334/73. See also Humphrey Dyson below.

¹² For details of the 'extra iudiciall' references from James I see, Wakely, 'Printing and Double-Dealing in Jacobean England', p. 149, fn 106. See also C3/334/73; and C5/592/24; C33/148/186; C33/147/107; C33/147/402.

the KPH. The case consequently rumbled on, through a series of Chancery petitions and cross petitions¹³, until 1629/30 when Chancery, once again, eventually found against Norton and in favour of Robert Barker—despite the fact that Barker had bribed Bacon to make the decree of 1619 in his favour, and may possibly have bribed Lord Keeper Thomas Coventry to do the same in his 1629 ruling.¹⁴

Norton was fined heavily by the court and remained in prison, possibly until his death in 1635.¹⁵ Robert Barker continued as King's Printer even after being committed to prison for debt in 1635, where he remained until his death in 1645.

¹³ See C2/JASI/N7/44; and C22/601/28.

¹⁴ For details of the 1629/30 Chancery petitions and rulings and a detailed account of Francis Bacon's bribe and involvement in the KPH, see, Wakely, 'Printing and Double-Dealing in Jacobean England'; for evidence of the Barker/Bacon bribe see *The Letters and the Life of Francis Bacon*, ed. by James Spedding, et. al., 7 vols (London, 1874), VII, pp. 213–4; 221–3; 252–3; and Francis Bacon, *Instauratio Magna*, pt II: *Novum organum and associated Texts*, ed. by Graham Rees with Maria Wakely, The Oxford Francis Bacon, XI (Oxford, 2005).

¹⁵ See SP16/169/5,6,7; SP16/169/20,21; SP16/175/123.