Between Captives and Consuls: Searching for the 'Little English' of Barbary

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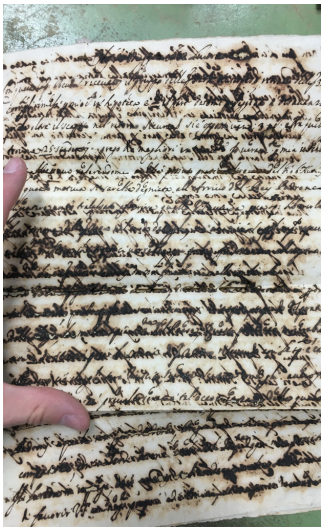
In the early modern period, many Britons freely took up residence in the Islamic world, in search of wealth, freedom or self-actualisation. However, little is known about these people and their lives, beyond incidental mentions in other sources. Drawing on little-known correspondence from the English consulate in late seventeenth century Tunis, this lecture traces the lives of servant apprentice William Newark, renegade translator Hassan Agha, and housekeeper-turned-merchant Edith Stedham to shed light on the everyday lives of these non-elite expatriates. In the spirit of Greg Dening, I hope to allow the 'little people' of the past to speak for themselves.

Greg Dening devoted his career to the study of the people 'on the other side of the beach', and the 'little people' on his own. In his own words, he wanted 'to celebrate their humanity, their freedom, their creativity and their dignity', listening to their voices in all the forms that are available to give 'the past and the other the dignity of being able to be their own selves' in his representations of them.[1] In this paper, I hope to follow in his footsteps, and tell the stories of some forgotten people.

In January 2019, I went on my first archival research trip, searching for documentation of the origins, experiences and influence of British expatriates who lived in the Maghreb in the seventeenth century. I was looking for a wide range of different documents, but the most exciting possibility was a collection housed in the UK National Archives, which originated from the English consulate in Tunis, and which had (as far as I could tell) remained almost entirely untouched by historians. The collection was sparsely described, so I had little idea of how valuable it might be.

In the event, what I found was box upon box, containing thousands of letters, financial records and legal documents, a treasure trove of material. Some of it was easy to read – some, not so much. But I didn't hesitate to get my hands dirty opening this treasure trove.

[1] Greg Dening, 'Performing Cross-Culturally', *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 25, 2 (December 2006): 1-2.



Figures 1-3, left to right: The National Archives (hereafter TNA) FO 335/3/6; TNA FO 335/1; Author's hand. Photographs: author, reproduced by kind permission of The National Archives.

Figure 4: Richard William Seale, *A correct Chart of the Mediterranean Sea, from the Straits of Gibraltar to the Levant: From the latest and best Observations: for Mr. Tindal's Continuation of Mr. Rapin's History*, 1745, ink on paper. Available in public domain from Wikimedia Commons.

The Maghreb (roughly the territories of modern Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya) was famed in the early modern period as the home of the dreaded Barbary corsairs. Portrayed in theatre, ballads, captivity narratives and fiery sermons alike as barbarous, brutal and alien pirates, the corsairs were reputed to capture and enslave Christians by the boatload, forcing them with threats and brutal treatment to renounce their religion and their nationality, 'turn Turk', and join the corsairs' eternal war against Christendom. Yet over the last few decades, historians have begun to tell a rather different story about Europe's relations with the Maghreb. The tropes of Maghrebi aggression in the period conceal a long history of friendly trade and intellectual exchange between the regions – not to mention European privateering attacks on, and enslavement of, Maghrebi peoples. Perhaps even more surprisingly, the early modern period witnessed hundreds, even thousands of Europeans who left their home countries to freely settle in the Maghreb, searching for personal advancement or freedom from restrictive European social norms.

These migrants lived in the Maghreb as expatriate merchants, joined Maghrebi armies and navies, and even freely chose to convert to Islam. Unfortunately, at least in the case of British migrants, the available source material surrounding these fascinating people has been quite limited, mostly mediated through government dispatches and printed narratives written by former captives.

However, the material that I have been looking at, and upon which my research is (now) heavily based, offers a wealth of new information. The archive in question was gathered by Thomas Goodwyn, an English merchant of no significant ancestry who through the 1670s built a formidable reputation in the booming Tuscan port of Livorno. In 1679, after the establishment of what was to be the first long-lasting treaty between England and Tripoli, Thomas Baker, the newly-appointed consul at Tripoli, persuaded Goodwyn to leave Livorno, and set up shop in Tripoli, thereby to gain a foothold in an untapped market. To Baker's dismay, Goodwyn soon found Tripoli not to his taste, and within a year relocated to Tunis, which featured a much stronger export economy as well as a better-established English trading house. Through the period of his residence in Tripoli and Tunis up to 1700, Goodwyn retained a huge number of letters that he received from all over the Mediterranean and Europe – Aleppo, Alexandria, Algiers, Alicante, Bizerte, Cadiz…and many other places.[2]

[2] For more on Goodwyn and Baker, see Nat Cutter, '"Grieved in my soul that I suffered you to depart from me": Isolation and Community in the English Houses at Tunis and Tripoli, 1679-1686', in Heather Dalton, ed., *Keeping Family in an Age of Long Distance Trade, Imperial Expansion and Exile 1550-1850* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, forthcoming 2020).



Figures 5-7, left to right: Pier Francesco Mola, *Oriental Warrior or Barbary Pirate*, 1650, oil on canvas; Engraving from Pierre Dan, *Histoire de Barbarie et de ses Corsaires*, 1637; Lorenzo A. Castro, *A Sea Fight with Barbary Corsairs*, c. 1681, oil on canvas. All available in public domain through Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 8: Richard William Seale, *A correct Chart of the Mediterranean Sea, from the Straits of Gibraltar to the Levant: From the latest and best Observations: for Mr. Tindal's Continuation of Mr. Rapin's History*, 1745, ink on paper. With author's annotations: red dots represent Goodwyn's places of residence (Livorno, Tripoli, Tunis) and blue represent the additional locations from which he received correspondence.

Through Goodwyn's archive, we gain a picture of not just the captives and consuls known from other sources but the hitherto almost-invisible 'middle people': the English soldiers, servants, converts, and apprentices who risked their livelihoods and identities to seek a new or better life in the Maghreb. As well as containing far more information about these people, for the first time we have a substantial collection of their own words. In the rest of my presentation, I want to share the stories of three of these middle people – a translator, a merchant apprentice, and a housekeeper turned merchant. Each of them was connected with the English merchants and consul in Tunis or Tripoli in the early 1680s. Each is regularly mentioned circumstantially in Goodwyn's letters during their period of residence, but all attract specific attention when there is cause for concern, providing a window into everyday life and struggle through their conflicts. These are the missing stories in early modern British-Maghrebi relations.

The first of our middle people is already known a little from the journal of his employer, Tripoli consul Thomas Baker. In 1680, Baker wrote in his journal that he had given to Hassan Agha, his dragoman, or translator, 'a Pistoll in Gold to forfeit Ten, if hee shall drink a drop of Wine or Brandy until the 23rd of September next'.[3] Just over a year later, Baker raged in his journal, 'I cashiered my conceited, foolish, impertinent false, Trayterous, base, Drunken Druggerman, who is called Hassan Agha; Who before his voluntary Turning Turk was named Edward Fountaine of a good family in Norffolk as hee pretends; A hopefull Branch, and a great comfort to his Relations!'[4] We thus understand that Edward Fountain converted to Islam by choice, taking up the Turkish name Hassan Agha (which means 'handsome lord') and that he had a problem with alcohol (at least from the perspective of his employer) – a dangerous problem for a new Muslim, but one that was common among young Turkish soldiers in the Maghreb. Goodwyn's archive adds an additional layer to Hassan's story. In 1680, Baker requested Goodwyn send him spurs and tack in order for Hassan to ride as a cavalryman in the Tripolitan army, a common occupation for converts in the Maghreb.[5] In August 1681, Baker responded to Goodwyn's enquiry about Hassan with a new report of Hassan's dismissal. Baker wrote that he had '(Praysed bee the Lords holy Name!) casheired him once more my service neere 3 months since – a more accursed Dog, knave,

[3] Thomas Baker, *Piracy and Diplomacy in Seventeenth-Century North Africa: The Journal of Thomas Baker, English Consul in Tripoli, 1677-1685*, edited by C.R. Pennell (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1989), 23 March 1680, 118. For more on Hassan Agha, see Nat Cutter, 'Grieved in my soul', forthcoming 2020.
[4] Baker, *Piracy and Diplomacy*, 13 May 1681, 129.
[5] Thomas Baker to Thomas Goodwyn, 28 August 1680, TNA, FO 335/2/3.

Rogue, Spiove, and Traytour (except Judas) was never yet undamn'd'. When Hassan fled to an Islamic religious leader to seek refuge from Baker's retribution, 'I left him to bee tortured only by ye remembrance of his owne foule actions, and thus am I rid of a notorious Villaine'.[6] Yet five years later, in 1686, Baker reported with regret, ' Hassan Agha lost his life in the quarrell against the Begh I am sorry for him, having on all occasions shewne himselfe a good souldier on horseback'.[7]

We have in this corpus a letter written from Hassan Agha to Goodwyn, just two months before his ignominious departure from Baker's service. Though ostensibly mundane, it offers some additional clues to understand Hassan's position. Converts were often distrusted and excluded by Christians and Muslims alike, so Hassan was glad to hear 'that you have not quite forgotten mee'. His drinking is also present, but presented as an honour to Goodwyn as Hassan promises to 'drink your health to save our soulss'. Hassan indicates friendly relations with Muslims, singing off with a greeting to 'bobo safare', evidently a Maghrebi or convert friend, and also indicates his own Islamic identity, signing off with his own name: Al Effendi Hassan Agha.[8]

The second middle person, William Newark, arrived in Tunis in 1683, sent by his family to apprentice for his uncle, Thomas Goodwyn, and another relative in Tunis, merchant Francis Barrington.[9] Newark was expected to act initially as a servant, but over time to learn the trade of a merchant and eventually make his fortune in Mediterranean trade. Unfortunately, Newark too had a problem. In August 1683 Barrington sent Newark and another servant named Joseph Punter to join Goodwyn as he established a new trading post at Cape Negro, a short journey from Tunis. Barrington sent with Newark and Punter a letter to Goodwyn with some serious concerns about them. According to Barrington, Newark had 'comitted those disorders as he is most Inclyned to since you left us'. Barrington counselled Goodwyn to 'keep a stricter hand over him', otherwise 'the Heat of his youthful blood; with ye ill Examples this Country affords; will prejudice his rising' to mercantile success. Barrington's reticence to specifically name Newark's 'disorders' is telling – and so is Barrington's additional concern that Punter 'might be too much a Boone companion for Couzin Will'.[10] It was a very common trope in English accounts of the Ottoman Empire that young Turkish men, particularly soldiers, routinely engaged in

[6] Thomas Baker to Thomas Goodwyn, 1 August 1681, TNA FO 335/2/11.
[7] Thomas Baker to Thomas Goodwyn, 22 March 1686, TNA FO 335/5/14.
[8] Hassan Agha to Thomas Goodwyn, 18 March 1681, TNA FO 335/2/8.
[9] For more on William Newark, see Cutter, 'Grieved in my soul', forthcoming 2020.
[10] Francis Barrington to Thomas Goodwyn, 1 August 1683, TNA FO 335/3/8.

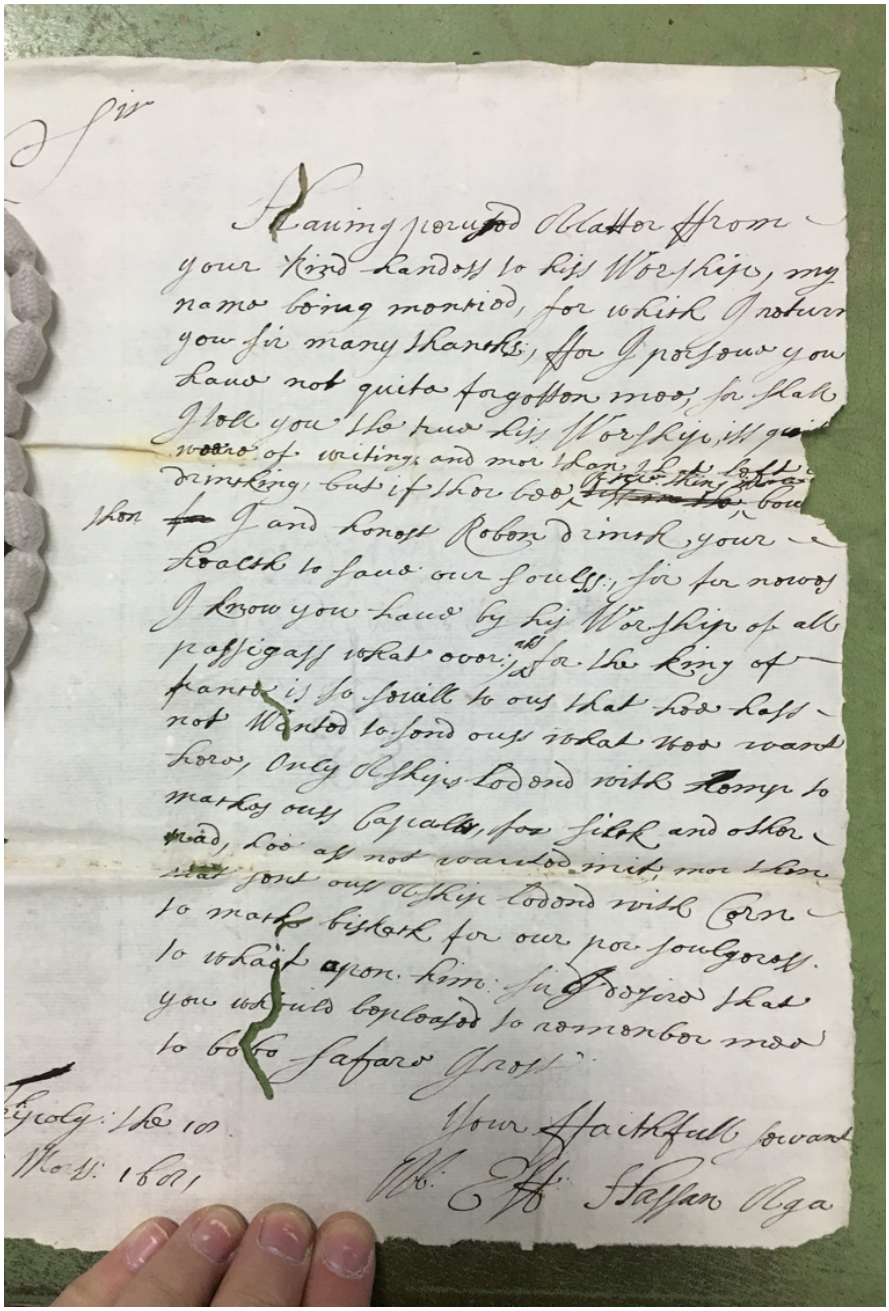


Figure 9: Hassan Agha to Thomas Goodwyn, 18 March 1681, TNA FO 335/2/8. Photograph: author, reproduced by kind permission of The National Archives.

homosexual activity. Judging by Barrington's veiled references, it seems likely that Newark was engaging in some form of sexual impropriety, and one in which Joseph Punter might also be involved. William Newark left England in the hopes of making his fortune under successful relatives, but struggled to conform with their morality in a society with different norms than his own.

Sadly, we have no letters written from Newark himself – he disappears from the records after mid-1684, either returned home or deceased – but we have several from Dorothy and Lucy Newark, who seem to be Newark's mother and sister, who visited Goodwyn in Tunis in 1688.[11] Note the careful, rounded italic hand, the lack of capitalisation and punctuation, and how Newark flatters her uncle, evidently wealthier and more successful than his family.

The third and final story, and perhaps the most exceptional of the three, belongs to Edith Stedham.[12] Stedham came to the English consulate in Tunis at some point before Goodwyn's arrival, and apparently acted as a housekeeper of sorts, providing food, clothing, and supplies to her male housemates on their trading expeditions: 'Mrs Stedham Salutes & sends you by this Hamall the Shirte you desired.'[13] From the outset, however, Stedham was a respected member of the household, specifically greeted in letters alongside the other merchants, and soon beginning to invest and trade in cloth and other commodities on her own account: 'Mrs Stedham presents her humble servise to you; and thinks her selfe much obliged to you for your care to procure her some small Profitts from your Station.'[14] In 1686, she was wealthy enough to support her long-estranged husband to join her in Tunis, albeit as a servant and her social inferior. Francis Barrington wrote to Goodwyn that Mr Stedham, 'having heard that ye plase is beseiged, cryes loth to depart hence', being 'very chary of his boddy Politick'. He continued,

> I thinke itt had been happy for her if shee had taken his forfeiture; for I have been told shee might have done itt; having forfeited ye Bonds of Matrimony by leaving her so many yeares without the least notice or knowlidge of his being alive or dead – but slipping ye opportunity shee I feare is like to receive trouble enough from him if once shee should be void of your Protection.[15]

[11] Lucy Newark to Thomas Goodwyn, 15 April 1688, TNA FO 335/7/6.
[12] For more on Edith Stedham, see Cutter, 'Grieved in my soul', forthcoming 2020.
[13] Francis Baker to Thomas Goodwyn, 27 May 1682, TNA FO 335/3/1.
[14] Francis Barrington to Thomas Goodwyn, 22 September 1683, TNA FO 335/3/9.
[15] Francis Barrington and Benjamin Steele to Thomas Goodwyn, 1 February 1686, TNA FO 335/5/16.

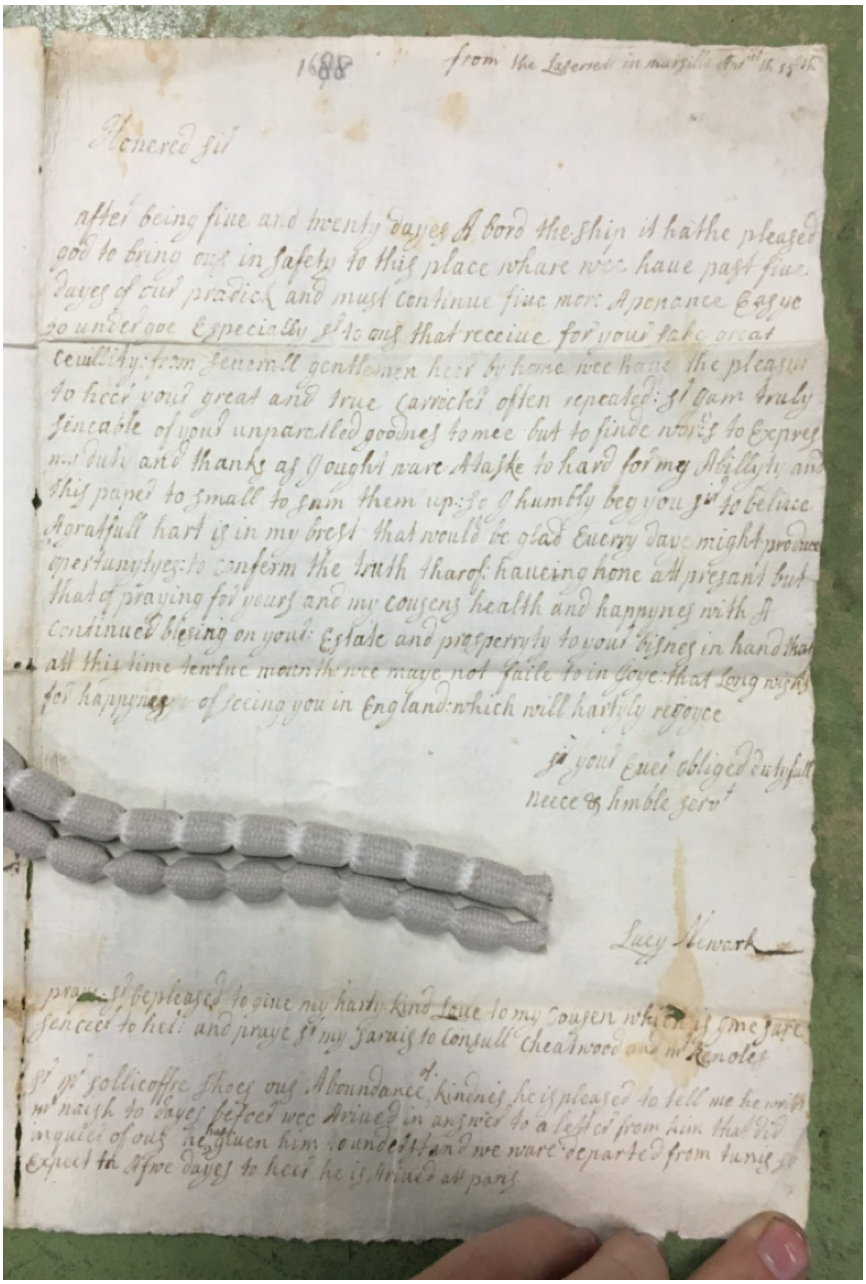


Figure 10: Lucy Newark to Thomas Goodwyn, 15 April 1688, TNA FO 335/7/6. Photograph: author, reproduced by kind permission of The National Archives.

Edith Stedham, like so many others who went to the Maghreb in the seventeenth century, or who have migrated throughout the world in centuries since, escaped poor treatment at the hands of a loved one to establish success on their own two feet. It is ironic to note that, as a husbandless foreign woman in a country which apparently corrupted *men* to drunkenness and sexual impropriety, the greatest threat to Edith's safety is the pathetic, penniless husband who abandoned her.

Stedham, too, wrote letters in her time at Tunis – despite that fact that her literacy was evidently quite limited. In this particular letter, Stedham's spelling was so indecipherable that Goodwyn, upon receiving it, carefully translated some particularly poorly-spelled words and wrote the result in pencil between the lines. However, Stedham's writing, however difficult to read, is enormously significant, because it may the earliest extant writing from an English woman in the Maghreb.

What I find so compelling about these middle people, the 'little English of Barbary' is that, on the one hand, they are so exceptional, so strange and alien – both to us in the twenty-first century, and to their own contemporary countrymen. The Maghreb was a place that posed dangers and temptations to them, as well as benefits. Yet in another way, they are so normal. They deal with the same, human problems – sexuality, addiction, abandonment – and the same kinds of hopes and desires – success, freedom, meaning, community – that capture us all. Listening to their voices provides a new window into the stories of risk, migration, assimilation and minority so common in our own multi-polar, globalised world. And like Greg Dening, I hope to bring these stories into the light.

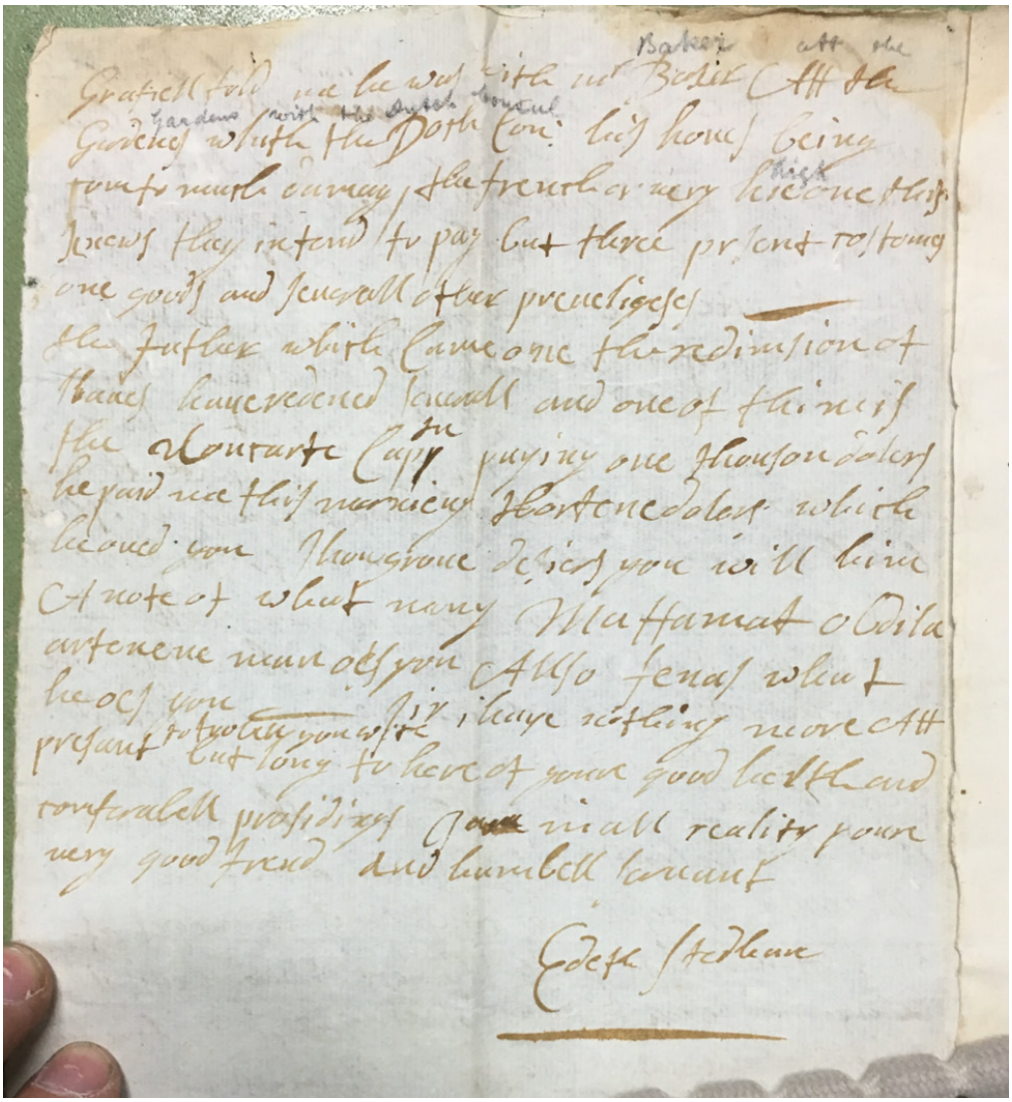


Figure 11: Edith Stedham to Thomas Goodwyn, 16 July 1685, FO 335/5/12. Photograph: author, reproduced by kind permission of The National Archives.