

PROCEEDINGS
OF THE
CAMBRIDGE ANTIQUARIAN
SOCIETY

(INCORPORATING THE CAMBS & HUNTS ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY)



VOLUME LIX

JANUARY 1966 TO DECEMBER 1966

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NOTES ON THE EARLY CAREER OF THOMAS THIRLBY, TUDOR BISHOP OF ELY

SIR JOHN GRAY

THOMAS THIRLBY, native of Cambridge, educated there, and subsequently Bishop of Ely, had at various stages of his career close connexions with the County, Town and University of Cambridge. In his *Thomas Thirlby—Tudor Bishop*, T. F. Shirley has given a very full account of his public career. In this note my intention is merely to correct certain details, which have hitherto been accepted as correct, regarding his early career.

Thirlby died on 26 August 1570 and was buried in the parish church of Lambeth two days later. The burial register of that church goes into his career in some detail. It (*inter alia*) tells us that he was a Doctor of Civil Law, born in Cambridge, student of Trinity Hall and successively bishop of Westminster, Norwich and Ely. For fuller details I would refer readers to Shirley's recent biography.

A number of Thirlby's letters survive, but in none of them does the Bishop refer to his childhood or his parents. Cooper (*Athenae Cantabrigiensis*, I, p. 287) says he was born in 1506, but, as Shirley points out, this would make him a Bachelor of Civil Law at the most improbable age of fourteen. More probably he was born some six or more years earlier.

Cooper (*loc. cit*) says he was the son of John Thirlby, sometime town clerk, scrivener and treasurer of the borough of Cambridge, but Dr W. M. Palmer (*Cambridge Borough Documents*, p. 149) suggests that this is improbable. The town clerk made his will on 2 May 1539 and it was proved in the Court of the Archdeacon of Ely on 16 August 1539. At that date the Archdeacon was Thomas Thirlby. In his will the town clerk mentions his wife Joan, whom he directs to arrange for the celebration of his obit, and also his daughter Ursula, and his son Laurence who 'shall have all my books'. There is no mention of any son named Thomas or of any other son (Palmer, *loc. cit*). In the circumstances one must perforce agree with Dr Palmer that it is highly improbable that the town clerk was the future bishop's father.

The fact that a man with that surname may have come to Cambridge at the end of the fifteenth century from one of the two villages of Thurlby in Lincolnshire and had thrived at his profession may have induced another man from the same place—possibly, but not necessarily, a relative—to follow in his footsteps. But this can only be a mere conjecture.

We are also left in the same doubt as regards the early schooling of the future bishop. At the time when Thirlby must have received his early education there were two endowed schools at Cambridge. King's College had a school for its sixteen choristers, into which non-choristers may also have been received. At Jesus College there were a master and usher, who were required to instruct in grammar and rhetoric the four choristers on the foundation and also 'those drawn to the grammar school from elsewhere gratis and without any demand of money' (*Statutes of Jesus College*, A.D. 1514-1515, p. 32). In this connexion it is not out of place to mention that, as bishop of Ely, Thomas Thirlby became a benefactor to Jesus College. It is also not out of place to recall that, as will be seen later, when he became a Fellow of Trinity Hall, Thirlby displayed a musical turn of mind, thus suggesting his possible education at one or other of these song schools. But both the above inferences may be wrong. Thirlby may have been educated at one or other of the ephemeral private schools, which were from time to time set up in Cambridge.

It has always been assumed that on leaving school Thomas Thirlby entered Trinity Hall, but other evidence goes to show quite definitely that this was not the case.

In *Letters and Papers of Henry VII.* Vol. I. *Addenda*, Part I, pp. 105, 110, appears what is described as 'the book of the view, valuation, and tax of the University of Cambridge' in 1522. As the editors of these papers say, this manuscript is 'unfortunately very much mutilated with lists for the most part illegible, both of graduates and *scholastici* arranged under the different colleges'. Fortunately for present purposes it is still sufficiently legible to provide us with the relevant evidence regarding Thirlby.

Trinity Hall appears under the heading *Collegium Divae Trinitatis*.¹ The first few names are all illegible, but there still can be traced parts of the surnames of two Fellows of the College. One of these reads 'ylney', who is quite certainly the Protestant Martyr Thomas Bilney, who took the degree of Bachelor of Canon Law in 1520-1.

Thirlby's name is not to be traced in this list, but appears unmistakably as 'Thos. Thyrlby' in a later list as a Bachelor of Civil Law, which degree he took in 1520-1. This list is headed as setting out the members of a *Hospitium*, i.e. Hostel. The name of the Hostel is no longer legible, but we can ascertain its name from information concerning another member thereof, namely, 'William Reynold, rector', who must be identifiable with '—Reynold of Borden Hostel', who was admitted to practise in law in 1516-17 (Venn, *Alumni Cantabrigiensis*, part I, vol. III, p. 446).

Borden Hostel was a *Hospitium Juristarum* or in other words a Hostel devoted exclusively to the study of law. A very full history thereof has been given by Dr H. P. Stokes in his *Medieval Hostels*.

At some later date Thirlby undoubtedly became a member of Trinity Hall. This leads us to the question as to when the following incident described by Foxe in

¹ Trinity College did not come into being until the amalgamation of King's Hall and Michaelhouse in 1546.

Acts and Monuments, IV, p. 621, took place. After telling us that Bilney never slept above four hours every night, he proceeds as follows:

He could abide no swearing or singing. Coming from church when singing was, he would lament to his scholars the curiosity of their dainty singing, which he called rather a mockery with God than otherwise. And when Dr Thirlby, Bishop after, then scholar lying in the chamber beneath him, would play upon his recorder (as he would often do), he would resort straight to prayer.

To judge from the dates of their respective degrees, Bilney and Thirlby must have been more or less of the same age. Where in the passage just cited he 'laments to his scholars', Foxe is clearly writing about Bilney the college don. But he is clearly wrong when he describes Thirlby as 'then scholar'. Thirlby must have migrated to Trinity Hall sometime after taking his bachelor's degree in 1520-1 and before taking his Doctor's Degree in 1528-9. If Thirlby had indulged in playing upon the recorder as a *scholasticus*, one imagines that those in authority would at the very least have bidden him to get rid of that instrument. But different rules applied to fellows and more especially to those who, like Thirlby, were more than once employed on legal business connected with the affairs of the university. Bilney might deplore the practice, but less puritanical dons were ready to tolerate Thirlby's recorder.



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