

29 NOV 1967

PROCEEDINGS  
OF THE  
CAMBRIDGE ANTIQUARIAN  
SOCIETY

(INCORPORATING THE CAMBS & HUNTS ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY)



~~VOLUME LX~~  
JANUARY 1967 TO DECEMBER 1967

LVI - LX  
1963 - 67

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*Published for the Cambridge Antiquarian Society (incorporating the Cambs and Hunts  
Archaeological Society) by Deighton Bell, 13 Trinity Street, Cambridge*

*Printed in Great Britain at the University Printing House, Cambridge*

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## THOMAS ALCOCK, MASTER OF JESUS COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE IN 1516

SIR JOHN GRAY

IN the second edition of my father, Arthur Gray's *History of Jesus College, Cambridge* (1960) the only reference to Thomas Alcock's Mastership of that College is to its 'brief tenure' between the Masterships of his predecessor, John Ecclestone, and that of his successor, William Capon. It is true that Alcock's tenure was just under five months. But his connexion with the College dated back almost, if not quite, to the earliest days of the College. Moreover, at least one important event affecting the ultimate history of the College would appear to have happened during his brief Mastership.

His surname suggests that he was a relative of John Alcock, Bishop of Ely and Founder of Jesus College, but how he fits into the family pedigree is uncertain. He was ordained to the first tonsure in the Bishop's Manor Chapel at Downham, Cambs, on 21 December 1499, and sub-deacon in the same Chapel on 14 March 1499. On 4 April 1500, being then a B.A. and Fellow of Jesus College, he was ordained deacon in the same Chapel. On the following 18 April he was ordained a secular priest in Ely Cathedral.<sup>1</sup> On 27 June 1500 he incepted as an M.A.<sup>2</sup>

On 21 May 1500 Thomas Alcock was presented to the living of Shipdham in Norfolk.<sup>3</sup> The fact that a month later he proceeded to his M.A. degree may suggest that he retained his fellowship, which he thereafter held in plurality with his benefice, but there appear to be no extant records on the subject. It is not until 1516 that we come again to more certain evidence regarding his career.

On 1 October 1500 Bishop John Alcock died at his Castle at Wisbech. It is evident that death overtook him suddenly and unexpectedly. He did not leave a will or any written directions as to the general governance of the College which he had so recently founded. The patent roll empowering him to found the College is dated 12 June 11 Hen. VII (1496) and indicates what his original intentions were regarding its constitution. As his register shows on 22 September 1499 and 10 May 1500 he held ordinations in what was already the College Chapel and doubtless gave directions *ad hoc* regarding matters affecting the conversion of the buildings of the former Nunnery of St Radegund to collegiate purposes. But the process of conversion took many years to fulfil. A deed of 31 January 1499 which endowed a chantry fellowship

<sup>1</sup> *Ely Episcopal Records* as edited by J. H. Crosby—C.U. Library Adv. d. 78.1, pp. 371-2.

<sup>2</sup> Grace Book B. i. pp. 123-4.

<sup>3</sup> The future Master of Jesus College must be distinguished from another, and somewhat older, Thomas Alcock, who became Archdeacon of Ely. The respective careers of the two men are set out in A. B. Emden, *Biographical Register of the University of Cambridge to 1500*, pp. 5-6.

states that it is founded 'in a College in Cambridge called Jesus College that now is or shall be'.<sup>1</sup>

When John Alcock suppressed the Nunnery and decided to apply its revenues and its buildings to collegiate purposes, he may well have failed to realize that he had taken over a *damnosa hereditas*. The revenues of the Convent were in a state of hopeless confusion and the conventual buildings were thoroughly dilapidated. These matters took many years to put to rights and it was not until a decade after the Bishop's death that it could be said that his College was placed on a financial footing. For the moment his sudden death came very near to being completely disastrous for the future prospects of his College in more ways than one. Not the least of these was that with his death the supply of red brick for the restoration and rehabilitation of the College buildings came to an abrupt end. This supply had come from the episcopally owned clay pits in the Isle of Ely. Alcock's immediate successor in the bishopric, Thomas Redman, had once been Abbot of Shap and titular Bishop of St Asaph. He does not appear ever to have graduated at either Cambridge or Oxford. He was not interested in the affairs of the University in his diocese, or those of the College which his predecessor wanted to build. So the supply of red brick was diverted to other purposes. John Sherman, the first historian of Jesus College, does not even mention his name. He was succeeded in 1505 by James Stanley, stepson of Lady Margaret Beaufort, mother of Henry VII. Sherman refers to the money lavished by Stanley on his house at Somersham and on other work at Manchester, and ends by saying 'let me keep further silence and let the most fair minded reader judge'.<sup>2</sup> Like Redman, he abstained from supplying red brick to Alcock's College.

The work of restoration must for the moment have been brought completely to a standstill. Very fortunately Alcock's friends, Sir Reginald Bray, his wife Catherine, and Sir John Rysley stepped into the breach and the College was enabled to finish the work by using the white or yellow brick from clay pits nearer to Cambridge. Very fortunately also, other benefactors gave endowments to the College, which went to supplement the attenuated revenues derived from the Nunnery estates.

As already said, Bishop Alcock never drew up a constitution for the College which he had in view. Sherman refers to the fact that he gave the College certain *statuta*, but these would appear to have been only directions *ad hoc* to meet particular occasions as and when they came to his notice.

John Eccleston, the second Master of the College (1505-15), gave orders for the distribution of the income of various benefactions given to the College after Alcock's death.<sup>3</sup>

Bishop Alcock had obtained royal letters patent which enabled him by the law of the land to endow a collegiate body corporate with the buildings and revenues of

<sup>1</sup> V.C.H. *Cambs.* III, p. 421, n. 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Aborigines Jesuani*, ed. J. P. Halliwell, p. 84.

<sup>3</sup> *Documents relating to the University and Colleges of Cambridge* (1852), I, p. 128.

the suppressed Nunnery, but it was deemed necessary to obtain papal sanction for the suppression of a religious house and the conversion of its property to secular purposes. It would appear that Bishop Alcock had delayed seeking for that sanction, until he could present to the Pope satisfactory evidence that such conversion was more or less a *fait accompli*, and was in a form which the Holy See was likely to approve. At the time of his death he evidently did not feel that he was in a position to do so.

James Stanley, Bishop of Ely, obtained Pope Julius II's consent to the suppression of the Nunnery and the conversion of its buildings and revenues to secular purposes some time before that Pope's death in 1512. Though, in the words of the preamble to certain draft statutes which were submitted for Stanley's approval, the community at Jesus College was still but 'a tiny flock' (*parvulus grex*), the time had come for the drawing up of a proper code of Statutes for the better governance of the College. Accordingly a draft set of Statutes was submitted for approval to Stanley some time before his death in March 1515.

In a footnote on p. 422 of volume III of *Victoria County History of Cambridgeshire*, Dr Fredrick Brittain has expressed a doubt as to whether Stanley ever sealed those Statutes. Certainly, as he says, if sealed, they could not have been in force for very long. The oldest copy of these Statutes are written upon paper in a sixteenth-century hand and are bound in a volume which contains a rental of 1555-56 and a copy of Bishop West's later Statutes which are also in a sixteenth-century hand.

An examination of the manuscript shows that these so-called Stanley Statutes contain a number of gaps and palpable errors. They are most unmethodically strung together and have the appearance of being a piece of amateur patchwork intended for submission to a qualified draftsman for conversion into a more regular document drawn up in proper legal form. They suggest that they never reached this further stage in draftsmanship. In other words, as Dr Brittain suggests, Stanley never sealed or promulgated them as Statutes. The fact that at a later date Bishop West declared that his Statutes revoked all previous Statutes does not alter this view. Such words of revocation have always been customary in documents drawn up by legal draftsmen. They are what such draftsmen would declare to be 'in common form' and are inserted *ex abundantia cautela*.

John Eccleston, the second Master of Jesus College, was probably largely responsible for the draft submitted for Stanley's approval. He died in February 1516. On 19 February in that year Thomas Alcock was admitted as his successor and a mandate issued for his formal induction to that office.<sup>1</sup> On 14 July in the same year he wrote a letter resigning the Mastership, and William Capon was nominated his successor and to be admitted on his taking the oath to observe the College Statutes, which he did seven days later.<sup>2</sup>

Nicholas West had been consecrated Bishop of Ely on 7 October 1515 and began a visitation of his diocese in the following spring. On 4 April he reported that he

<sup>1</sup> C.U. Library (Baker MS) Mm. i. 29, fos. 278-80.

<sup>2</sup> C.U. Library (Baker MS) Mm. i. 29, fos. 276-8.

had found grave disorders in the monastery at Ely.<sup>1</sup> It must have been at about that date that he arrived in Cambridge to continue his visitation.

What he discovered at Jesus College is set out in the preamble to the Statutes which he granted to that College. He tells us that in the course of his visitation of his diocese, he personally visited the College. He then learnt that his predecessor Bishop John Alcock had suppressed the Nunnery of St Radegund and set up a College in the buildings belonging to that convent. He then proceeds to say that 'our great Father was prevented by death from his completing what he had in his pious mind and could not complete his memorable work' and had found the revenues of the suppressed convent were insufficient to support the numbers of the new foundation he had in view. Accordingly as his successor, Bishop West, determined in order to 'fulfil the great work which our devout father and very excellent predecessor began, in so far as we can so do with God's aid, to establish, both firmly spiritually and temporarily, with fatherly affection' a code of Statutes for the better regulation and government of the College.<sup>2</sup>

Reading between the lines of such extant records as survive, it would appear that West's appointment of Thomas Alcock as Master was made for two good reasons. First, he was one of the very earliest members of that College and secondly, as a young man, he had been intimately acquainted with the wishes expressed by the Founder. West was anxious, in so far as changed circumstances permitted, to carry out Bishop Alcock's wishes, and no man was better suited to assist him in that purpose than Thomas Alcock.

Doubtless, the very amateurish document which had been submitted to Stanley as a draft had already begun to be put into more legal shape and form by the time that Thomas Alcock became Master, but West wanted conscientiously to be sure that the final draft in no way ran counter to the will and intention of the Founder and it was for that reason that he sought for the *nihil obstat* of the Founder's kinsman. When that was obtained, the Statutes could be promulgated.

Thomas Alcock's duties came to an end when the Statutes reached this stage of fruition and he relinquished the Mastership. Evidently he had no desire to be tied down to the duties of that post and was anxious to return to clerical labours outside and beyond the College. He had been made Vicar General of the diocese of Ely in 1516 and became the Bishop's Chancellor in 1521, but appears to have attended more or less faithfully to his parochial duties at Shipdham. He died on 19 September 1523. A mural brass in Shipdham Church commemorates him. I am indebted to Dr M. J. Waring, Fellow of Jesus College, for a photostat of a rubbing thereof. As he informs me, the brass had at one time or other been much mutilated owing to the insertion of huge iron screws and brass pins. In the circumstances I do not attempt to reproduce the inscription with its numerous abbreviations as it is in its present state, but set out the purport and effect thereof in modern English writing. It reads as follows:

<sup>1</sup> *Letters and Papers, Henry VIII*, ii, 1733.

<sup>2</sup> *Documents relating to the University and Colleges of Cambridge* (1852), III, p. 94.

THOMAS ALCOCK, MASTER OF JESUS COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE IN 1516 95  
PRAY OF YOUR CHARITY FOR THE SOUL OF MASTER THOMAS ALKOKE SOMETIME PARSON  
OF THIS CHURCH AND WHO DIED THE XIX DAY OF SEPTEMBER IN THE YEAR OF OUR LORD  
MVXXXIII ON WHOSE SOUL MAY JESUS HAVE MERCY.

Bishop West's Statutes conferred the appointment of the Master of Jesus College on the Bishop of Ely, and it was not until 1882 that the right to elect the Master was bestowed upon the Fellows of the College. Though on the whole the Bishops of Ely showed honesty and discernment in their appointments to the Mastership, the result was that actual members of the College were very rarely appointed to the post. During the sixteenth century only three such persons were appointed, namely, Thomas Alcock (1516), John Reston (1546-51) and John Duport (1590-1617).

