
The Rev William Lee (c. 1550–1617) Vicar of Stapleford, Cambridgeshire

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“Very few brasses seem to have been laid down in the seventeenth century, and none are of any interest”
(Clayton 1969, 9).

A three-piece brass memorial plate commemorating the life of Rev William Lee (c. 1550–1617) is affixed to the chancel floor of Stapleford Church, of which he was incumbent 1574–1617. This memorial is described, its Latin and English inscription translated and explained. Discussion of its cryptic Latin message suggests that it is intended to offer insights into the anguished mind of a conscientious parish priest caught up in the throes of the Reformation.

Introduction

In the chancel of St Andrew’s Parish Church, Stapleford, is a seventeenth-century brass plate (Figure 1, Plate 5) commemorating the death in 1617 of the Rev William Lee (c. 1550–1617), a native of Batley in Yorkshire. The main purpose of this article is to re-examine its Latin inscription and postulate how best to interpret it.

William Lee was born about 1550. Both his parents were dead by the time he was eight and he was brought up by his uncle, Rev John Greenwood (Lester 1962, 12, 18–20). There is a possibility that he received his early schooling nearby at Birstall, as a Grammar School was established there in 1561 (Cradock 1933, 141–3). He later went up to Cambridge where he took his BA and MA degrees (Lester 1962) and was ordained before being inducted to the living of Stapleford in 1577 (A Cambridge Alumni Database <http://venn.csi.cam.ac.uk/ACAD/intro>, where LY570W uniquely identifies him as Lee, William; The Act Book of the Bishop of Ely; CChG website: record ID: 29509).

A description of the Brass

At first sight, there is nothing particularly unusual about William Lee’s memorial. It consists of three brass plates set in the shape of a capital I, the top and bottom arms measuring about 20 inches (c. 51cms) by

6 inches (c. 15 cms), the central arm of the same length but slightly wider. The central strut shows a robed figure; the top cross bar several lines of Latin and the bottom piece five lines of English. The top inscription is in Roman letters, all capitals and a reference is given to 2 Timothy 4.7 from which a quotation is taken. Underneath is added in slightly larger capitals ANNO DÑI 1617 ÆTATIS SUÆ. The lower inscription is in very fine Gothic script with the exception of the numeral 43, denoting the length of William’s incumbency, which is in a cruder hand. One of the great fascinations of this brass is that, although on first acquaintance it looks to be a simple and straightforward memorial, each of its three components – the top script, the central figure and the bottom inscription – poses a series of questions.

The central figure is not wearing the traditional surplice, alb and stole, but what seems to be an academic gown. He has a short pointed beard and ruff, and short sleeves, underneath which can be seen the tighter sleeves of a doublet. The front panels of the gown are trimmed with fur. It is highly unlikely that the figure is a likeness of William Lee himself and it seems clear from the fact that the right elbow and bottom curve of the gown are cut by the line of the brass itself that the figure has been cut from another plate (cf. Haines 1861, ccl).

Following the dissolution of the monasteries after 1538 many churches and graveyards had been plundered (Haines 1861, 19). Hundreds of brass plates were torn down: but they were not destroyed: they were valuable spoil. Many of the plates were torn off tombs and re-engraved on the other side. Often also larger brasses would be cut down to make smaller ones with new inscriptions added. The style of dress on William Lee’s memorial shows that the engraving was not of a pre-Reformation priest: but it could well have been the brass of an academic stolen from a Cambridge college and sold cheaply to a local engraver to do duty at Stapleford. That the figure is wearing a skull cap usually reserved for Doctors of Divinity (as was established by Haines 1861) seems to point to its having been engraved earlier for a more senior academic than William Lee – and Cambridge with its large supply of



Figure 1. The seventeenth-century brass of the Rev. William Lee. See also Plate 5.

academic memorials was on the doorstep.

In the four centuries since William Lee's death, Stapleford Church has undergone many changes, which included a remodelling in 1866 (*Bury and Norwich Post* 18th December 1866). Unfortunately, there is no firm evidence that his memorial was re-set at that time, though there is a possibility that it was, and one wonders where its original site might have been. Furthermore, since the brass is in three parts, it is impossible to be categorical that they all came from one original, or even that they were assembled at the same time. Such questions, however intriguing as they may be, need not deflect us from the main point of this article.

The lower inscription

The five lines of Gothic writing at the bottom of the memorial read:

*Williã Lee borne at Batley in Yorkeshire.
Vicar of this Churche of Stapleforde. 43
yeares. Studious of ye good of eyther place.
Nowe sleepeth heare waytinge for the blessed
appearinge of Jesus Christ to Judgement*

Excepting two observations, this is a straight-forward inscription. The first – a minor point – is the employment of a 'tilde' over the 'a' of William (showing the omission of the letter 'm'), which was a common practice, similarly employed on three words on the upper inscription (see below). The second point is of rather greater moment: the figure 43 is more crudely inscribed than the other lettering, which is of finer engraving. It seems that the 43 was added separately later by a much less skilled engraver, just as the 17 (in the date 1617 under the upper inscription) was engraved by a different hand and at a different time from the 16 (Lack *et al.* 1995, 217). Presumably the full script was commissioned before William's death and the 43 only added after he had died. Black figure Gothic script was quite common on brasses in the first decade of the seventeenth century, but much rarer in the second. Indeed it would be difficult to find a later example than this – itself another reason for assuming that the main engraving was done during William's lifetime – (perhaps by a London engraver?) and possibly ten years earlier and the 43 added later. Furthermore, had the inscription been cut in 1613 or later, there would probably have been mention of the foundation of the Grammar School rather than the more general reference to William's affections shared by his birthplace and the scene of his Ministry. But the figure 43 raises another important question. Why 43 and not 40? The figure 43, however, is quite clear and there must be a reason for this discrepancy, for memorials of this kind are usually accurate in this type of record.

William Lee at Cambridge

To find an answer to this question we need to go back to William's career at Cambridge. Unfortunately at the

time (approximately) – when we might have expected him to be at College – there were three William Lees at Cambridge: one at Peterhouse, one at Clare and a third at St John's College (Venn and Venn, 1924, 66). At one time the Peterhouse William was thought to have been Vicar of Stapleford. The Master of Peterhouse during the period 1563–1589 was Dr Pearse, the Dean of Ely. Stapleford parish was under the patronage of the Dean and Chapter of Ely. Therefore William Lee, as a Peterhouse man known to the Dean would have been a favoured candidate. The main objection to this idea is the complete lack of any supporting evidence. It is pure speculation.

Venn and Venn (*loc. cit.*) record that William Lee was admitted to Clare on 25th Oct 1570 during these very years of insecurity. The son of Thomas and Ann Lee of Batley, West Yorkshire, he was born at Batley in 1550, matriculated in 1570, took his BA in 1573 and MA in 1577. He is recorded as having served as vicar at Stapleford from 1574–1617. The first problem here (noted by Lester 1962, 19) is to reconcile the 43 years suggested here (and recorded on the plate) with the 1577 date of induction given in the Act Book of the Bishop of Ely.

One explanation is that William was ordained immediately after his first degree and that in the first instance went to Stapleford as a curate, where there were certainly curates before his arrival (Wright *et al* 1982, 227–238; fn 258 citing *Alum. Cantab.* to 1751, iii. 66 [Venn and Venn 1924]).

To graduate MA there was no need for him to remain in residence at Cambridge: he could very well have served as curate and continued his studies. There is an interesting pointer to this having happened in *The Spending of the money of Robert Nowell* (Grosart, 1897). Under the year 1573 it is recorded that 5 shillings was given *Too a poor scholler, the vicar of Stapleforde on the 7 October 1573* (Grosart *idem* 166; 167, fn 11). The name of the recipient is not given, so that we cannot be sure that this was 'our' William: but it seems very likely that this was he. Alexander Nowell, former Dean of St Paul's, the greatest educator of his age, could well have been the trigger which inspired William by this simple gift at the point when it was needed – as it did Henry Bury, who was later to found a school of his own. It seems a reasonable assumption that between the years 1573 and 1577, when John Leeds was Vicar of Stapleford, that William Lee both served as curate and completed the studies for his MA degree. The later engraver who added the 43 was simply told that William first came to Stapleford in 1573 and accepted the round figure of 43 years (it was actually 43 years and 5 months) between 1573 and 1617 as the period of this Vicariate.

It has always been something of a puzzle that William went to Clare College rather than St John's. His uncle, Rev John Greenwood had been to St John's and after his MA had been elected to a fellowship there (Lester 1962, 12). There is no record of his having held an incumbency after leaving Cambridge but that is not an uncommon experience (Website Database of the Church of England: CCEd, entry GRNT542J)

suggests he may have been Vicar of Orford c. 1544). Many young men who were ordained at this time, especially if they returned to the north of England where there was a dearth of parishes, either had to wait many years for a living of their own or – as often happened – failed to get one altogether. Many of them turned to teaching in their local school, which is probably what John Greenwood did. His own Fellowship at the College would have been an obvious connecting link and St John's, at the time had two other things to commend it. It was the college above all others favoured by men from the north of England – especially Lancashire and Yorkshire (Fallows 2001, 38, 39). At the time it was literally full of northern men. It was also the college which was at the forefront of the reforming movement, where the bitterest opposition was to be found to Roman Catholicism and its practices, and where the surplice was condemned as the 'rags of Rome'. This is not to say that the Rev John himself was an ardent reformer but he was a practical man and he must have known that his own college was at the time a real powerhouse of religious discussion and a very stimulating environment for his young nephew to prepare for the ministry.

Now there is a possibility that he did indeed send William to St John's, for there was an entrant there in 1565 when William would have been 15/16 – as already noted – quite a normal age for boys like William to have entered the University at that time. The St John's' William did not take a degree and there is a possibility that if he was our founder that he returned home for a few years and then found a patron going to Clare who was prepared to support him as his sizar. There were very good reasons for William to wait. The rivalry between Elizabeth and Mary was at its most bitter. There were Roman Catholic plots against the new Queen, Elizabeth. In 1570 the Pope excommunicated her and released all her English subjects from allegiance to her. In 1569 a northern insurrection in Mary's support was suppressed with great cruelty. There was probably never a more difficult time for a young man to enter the Ministry.

With all this in mind one is tempted to suggest a new framework for William Lee's career at Cambridge and arrival at Stapleford: that he was sent by his uncle, a former fellow of St John's, to his uncle's old college when he was 15/16; that he found the work difficult and was quite out of his depth in the current religious situation; that he returned to Batley for four years during which he received further teaching from his uncle; that he applied again successfully to Clare, when it was now much clearer that the Reformed Church was here to stay; that his position as sizar confirms that money was short; that he accepted a curacy at Stapleford as a means of financing himself through the remaining four years to his MA degree; that his name was given to the executors of Robert Nowell's will as being a worthy young man to receive a modest grant; that he proved himself a good pastor at Stapleford and when the previous vicar John Leeds died, he was the natural successor.

The upper inscription

The most interesting and tantalising third of this old brass is the five lines of Latin at the top. They read:

CVRSVM CONSŪMAVI LICET DICERE, VTINAM &
ILLVD : BONŪCERTAMEN CERTAVI, DE RELIQVO
REPOSITA EST MIHI &C. 2 TIM. 4.7. VOS LEC
TORES ILLVD IDEM AGITE, SAGITE.
ANNO DÑI 1 6 1 7 ÆTATIS SVÆ

At first glance they seem straight forward: five lines of clear Roman capitals, not as well spaced or executed as the lower inscription but quite easy to read and presumably chosen by William Lee himself.

CVRSVM CONSŪMAVI LICET DICERE translated literally 'It is allowed to me to say 'I have completed my course'. Or, to put it more easily 'I have completed my course: that I can say'.

What follows at first sight looks like a well-known quotation from the Vulgate. The actual reference is given: 2 TIM.4.7. (This itself is unusual on an engraved brass. Occasionally references are found on tombstones but they are very rare on brasses.) And the reference stands out very clearly – one's eye is drawn to it in the centre of the inscription. Let us do what the author obviously intended and look up the actual reference. It runs as follows:

(verse 7)
BONUM CERTAMEN CERTAVI, CURSUM
CONSUMMAVI,
FIDEM SERVAVI

(verse 8)
IN RELIQUO REPOSITA EST MIHI CORONA
IUSTITIAE,
QUAM REDDET MIHI DOMINUS IN ILLA DIE,
IUSTUS IUDEX

'I have fought the good fight, I have completed my course, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness which the Lord, the righteous judge will give me on that day'.

Verse 7 contains three statements in a precise order and these are no doubt what the recorder of the inscription intended us immediately to think when we were given the reference so clearly. But what the engraved inscription says is this: 'That I have finished my course I can say: I WISH THAT I COULD ALSO SAY – (UTINAM ATQUE ILLUD) – I HAVE FOUGHT A GOOD FIGHT, henceforth is laid up for me etc.

And here is where the intriguing problem lies. The author does not make the three straightforward claims listed in the verse from Timothy: he claims the only one to which he is justified – he has completed his course: he has ended his life: he has died – that he can definitely say. But then he goes on to add 'I wish also that I could have said 'I have fought a good

fight'. If William Lee chose this inscription himself – and it seems that he did – was he being modest? Is this a simple way of confessing 'I did not do all that I could have done: there are things that disappoint me, battles that I could have fought. I did not fight as hard as I might have done'. (Fight for what, we may ask: or against what?) But perhaps even more difficult to answer is what has happened to the third statement 'I HAVE KEPT THE FAITH': a complete omission, although the engraver has gone on to quote verse 8 which begins *de reliquo reposita est mihi*. Are we supposed to assume that the expressed wish *UTINAM & ILLUD* (sc. *Liceat dicere*) – 'I wish I could also say this ...' – extends to the keeping of the faith as well? William Lee's ministry was spent in very difficult times for the Church: the old established order had been shattered: the power of the Catholic Church had been broken, the authority of Rome attacked. England was torn with religious controversy and there was much yet to come. But through it all William Lee had kept his ministry and was well loved and respected by the simple people he dealt with. Their faith in Stapleford was deeply rooted in the past. Acts of Parliament could not change people's faith and deeply held beliefs overnight. What concessions did he have to make? Did he make no mention of 'keeping the faith' because it was simply not safe to do so? Did he, in his conservative country parish, continue quietly many of the old ways of the Church before the Reformation? As time passed and Elizabeth's reforms gained momentum did he slowly adapt (as so many fellow clergy did) to the new ways? – but in doing so did he suffer pangs of conscience that he had not really kept the faith? – the faith of his fathers? Should he have fought harder against the new intrusions? Is this why he wishes he could have said 'I fought a good fight'? Is he putting on record for future generations to read that in his Ministry he had a crisis of conscience? – or even of faith?

Better probably to offer the quotation and let people draw their own conclusions. His parishioners – those who knew him – would see the reference: they would not understand the Latin, but the Authorised Version was now there for all who could to read and they would arrive at their own conclusions.

It had been begun by scholars at the command of James the First in 1607 and was published in 1611. The Geneva Bible, produced by English exiles during the Marian persecution, had been first published in 1560 and was the first to be printed in Roman type (rather than the black letter gothic) and also the first to have its chapters divided into verses. It proved very popular and frequent new editions appeared between 1560 and 1617. The new (King James) Bible, much more easily accessible to his parishioners may have been a further factor which prompted William to give the exact reference in Timothy. For the first time they had a reasonable chance of finding an exact reference and being able to read it!

For William Lee there must have been much soul-searching and spiritual torment in his ministry. He came from a devout Catholic family. His uncle had

been a priest of the Church. He was not himself wealthy – he describes his estate as a 'mean estate' – though it must be pointed out that in addition to his foundation at Batley he left property and money to a charity in Stapleford (Wright *et al.* 1982). He ministered faithfully and loyally to a simple flock in a country parish – and whether he kept the faith and how he kept the faith we shall never know. But one likes to believe that, despite the torments and anxieties of his soul, he did.

The remaining words of the inscription are a variation on a fairly common formula:

'you, Readers, do the same and be wise'. The implication is clear: 'Let the words of Paul to Timothy be your guide' The date is given as 1 6 1 7 – but the age is omitted. The normal way would have been to say: *AETATIS SUAE ANNO 6 7*. (Sometimes the *anno* is omitted.) William's memorial merely says 'In the year of our Lord aged – And none of the customary verbs – *obit/decessit*: he died, or *obdormivit*: he fell asleep – is put in. The 16 of 1617 seems to have been cut by the same hand as cut the four lines above it, but both the alignment of the 17 and the shape of the final 7 show that these two figures (like the 43) were added by a less skilled engraver at a later date. If we are right in assuming that the figure should have been 67 it is possible that the engraver, running out of space and noticing the similarity with 1 6 1 7, simply omitted it. In an age when the average life expectancy was under 30, a ministry of 43 years must have seemed immense.

Discussion and Conclusion

Six years before William Lee died, he purchased land near Batley with which to endow a free Grammar School in the town (Lester 1962, 14–17). The school he founded remained faithful to his wishes. Though it has changed radically over the years, it has never ceased to prepare such as be fit for the University and is celebrating its quatercentenary in 2012. The Stapleford brass therefore commemorates not only a long serving and much loved pastor, but also the foundation of one of Yorkshire's most famous Grammar Schools.

This brass is, however, something more than the simple record of a vicar's service and a school's foundation. It gives an insight into the mental anguish of a conscientious priest caught up in the throes of the Reformation and his solution to his dilemma: the founding of an institution where future generations would have the knowledge to absorb the new Bible, be educated to reach their own conclusions and enabled to keep the faith in their own way. It is a reminder of how and why so many of our ancient grammar schools came into being.

The message inscribed upon William Lee's memorial at Stapleford does not just offer important insights into his life: it is also a mute but most valuable record of the turbulent times he lived through.

Acknowledgments

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Access to certain of the information used in this article is available online at:

ACAD A Cambridge Alumni Database. <http://venn.csi.cam.ac.uk/ACAD/intro>
[accessed 29th February 2012]

and through:

Database of the Church of England [CCed]: *A commentary on the records employed for the Clergy of the Church of England Database 1540–1835 relating to the Diocese of Ely*.
[accessed 29th February 2012]



Plate 5. The seventeenth-century brass of the Rev. William Lee in St. Andrew's Parish Church, Stapleford.