

## Thame School and New College

The former Clerk of the King's Jewels, Sheriff of Oxfordshire and despoiler of monasteries, Sir John Williams, Lord Williams of Thame (c.1500-1559), made provision in his will for the foundation of a free school in Thame, and directed his executors to endow it with income from estates in Brill, Oakley, and Boarstall on the borders of Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire.

The school was admitting pupils from at least 1570, and was formally established in January 1575; the statutes issued that August carry finely penned ink images of Queen Elizabeth I and of Lord Williams himself, and outline in detail the endowments and governance of the school and its associated almshouse in Thame.



(NCA 5729)

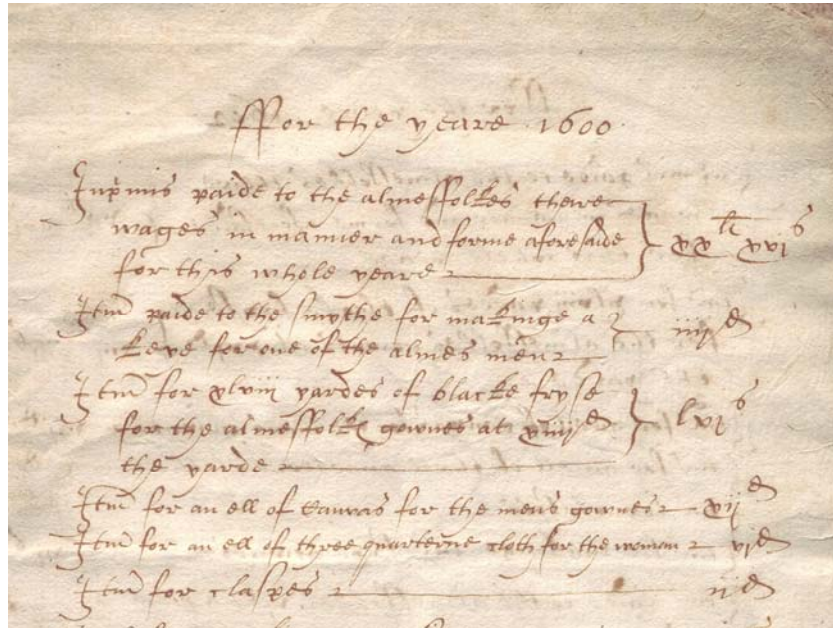
By this date the executors had appointed New College as perpetual trustees, and until the nineteenth century we effectively had control of the school, subject to approval by the Earls of Abingdon as descendants of Lord Williams. To this day we still retain close links with the school as one of its trustees, and as a result the college archives include a quantity of Thame school papers dating from the sixteenth century onwards, which are as remarkable for their idiosyncratic storage as for their often attractive appearance and frequently contentious subject matter.

The executors provided two great oak chests for the archives of the school. Both chests were identified on their lids by labels reading 'Schola Thamensis', secured under sheets of horn set into engraved brass holders. Our Warden and other key-holders had their own keys (attached to similarly labelled lengths of chain), and one of the chests also came with an awesome set of directions for unlocking it, for failure to follow exactly the instructions for the correct order and number and turns of the three keys would cause the mechanism to seize up. Not surprisingly, that chest

seems never to have been used and the documents were kept instead in the second oak chest.

Running costs of the school derived largely from an annual subvention out of the rectorial manors of Brill, Oakley and Boarstall, which lay within Bernwood Forest in Buckinghamshire, very near to the Oxfordshire border. The almshouse was funded out of rents from two local pubs, a farm at Long Crendon, and twenty-one houses in Thame. In the 1580s the rights to the lands and income was challenged by the Dyrham family, hereditary royal foresters, and the resulting and complicated tangle of arguments came to the Exchequer Court which at first found in favour of Sir John Dyrham. The trustees of Thame School retaliated with their own Chancery case, arguing that the rectory of Oakley was coterminous with the rectory of Brill and encompassed the entire forest area, and they requested Erasmus Williams, a fellow of New College, to draft a map showing the main landmarks in some detail. Williams's draft became the basis of two superb manuscript maps dating from 1590, which are still in the college archives. One carries the arms of Lord Williams of Thame and New College, and marks the parish/forest boundary with a thick black line; the other map carries the royal arms (since the then master of the school, William Place, pointed out that it would seriously weaken their case to ignore the fact that the Crown owned the forest), and marks the tenants' copyhold strips, the village houses, and even the hunt viewing-stand east of Little London. Both maps show different details of the villages and hamlets, and one includes a stylistic view of Thame itself. This time the court found against Sir John Dyrham, and in the 1630s the Crown disafforested the area and sold off its own rights under forest law.

With its estates and rights secured once more, the trustees returned to the routine matters of running the school. Expenditure was dominated by the salaries of the schoolmaster and usher, by taxes and poor rates, and by ongoing repairs to the school buildings. There was additionally the regularly recurring cost of maintaining Lord Williams's tomb in Thame church, and of 'cleansing the watercourse' - a euphemism for the sanitary arrangements at the school. One account book concerns itself occasionally with the almshouse which also fell within the trusteeship of the governors. It records for instance in 1600 a total of £2 17s. 8d. spent on new gowns 'for the almesfolke': the five men's gowns were made of black frieze (glazed cotton) and stiffened with canvas, and the one woman's with 'three-quarterne cloth', and fastened with clasps.



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The account rolls and some of the legal papers are still preserved in their original draw-string document bags of sacking or coarse linen, onto which are sewn, with enormous stitches, their contents labels, but the documents have suffered no obvious damage from such (literally) homespun storage. Inside their oak chest they jostle alongside the property deeds and leases which are stored in small rectangular or circular leather-covered deed boxes, their lids secured by parchment ties and paper labels written in an exquisite Tudor italic hand.



If the organisation of the deeds chest seems eccentric, it pales to insignificance when compared with the printed and bound copies of the school statutes. These, in perhaps one of the most bizarre forms of record-keeping ever known, were nailed

inside the desks of the master and usher. The master's copy came to New College (complete with part of the desk) some time in the nineteenth century. Printed on vellum, it has protective brass studs and horn label on the cover, but is firmly fixed inside the desk by four large metal rivets through its front cover. In fact the volume is of considerable bibliographical interest, the printing being the work of H. Bynneman and the cover (seen better in the Usher's copy, which is also in the college archives) lavishly tooled with blind-stamped ornaments around yet another horn label affixed by an engraved brass holder.



Whenever the mastership fell vacant, New College had the right to put forward two candidates, usually from among its own fellows, and the final choice was made by the Earls of Abingdon as the descendants of Lord Williams. The appointments were not always successful. For example, the fellows' voting papers survive for 1647 and record the names of two candidates recommended by Warden Pincke and the senior fellows. One of them, Thomas Kitchener, decided to shorten the odds by voting for himself, but it made no difference as Lord Abingdon chose a quite different candidate, William Ayliffe, as the new master. During the eighteenth century the school also had to cope with non-resident pluralists as masters, such as William Stratford (a Christ Church man, as the school's historian Howard Brown was quick to point out) who was appointed master of the school in 1786 but seems to have spent much of his time five miles away, at his rectory in Easington. A few months later the previous master (William Coke, who had been forced to resign because he also had held a church living while master of the school) wrote angrily on the matter after seeing an advertisement for the school placed in the *Reading Mercury* by 'a Person stiling himself the Master of Thame School'. Stratford nevertheless remained in post at the school until 1814.

By the 1870s the school was in a really bad way. The master, Dr Thomas Fooks, had become a recluse, spending all his time in his rooms, playing the violin; and the school had only three pupils, two of whom never turned up to lessons. The Endowed Schools Commission therefore was asked to step in, as a result of which Dr Fooks was retired and the Commission's new scheme for the management of the

School established a charitable trust in 1874 headed by the Warden of New College and the Chairman of the Thame Poor Law Union Board of Guardians, assisted by ten governors. A new school house for day boys and boarders was built in 1879, the money being raised from the sale of most of the school's landed property. The scheme was modified in 1911, and after 1944 the school became a voluntary controlled school under the new Education Act. Today it is a thriving and popular comprehensive school.

Famous early pupils of the school included William Lenthall (1591-1622), Speaker of House of Commons during the Civil War and Protectorate; Edward Pococke (1604-1691), the orientalist who brought back seeds for some of the earliest cedars to be grown in England; the much-despised Dr John Fell (1625-1686), and Anthony Wood (1632-1695), the antiquary and historian. A brief description of the school archives appears in Francis Steer, *The Archives of New College, a Catalogue* (1974), pp.186-187, 426-433.

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