

**Nicholas Stoughton (1592–1648):  
MP, Surrey Militia Officer, and Patron of International Learning**

In the seventeenth century many gentlemen's sons left Oxford without a degree. On the surface they had nothing to show for their stay in the university.<sup>1</sup> Surviving account books show that some of them spent their money on dancing and fencing lessons or on going boating, shooting or fishing, for which there were of course ample opportunities around the city.<sup>2</sup> Others seem likely to have been more studious, but pinpointing what intellectual benefit they derived from their education is difficult. With the increasing digitisation of key sources, however, it is possible to spot evidence that could previously have gone unnoticed.

Nicholas Stoughton of Stoke by Guildford, Surrey, matriculated at Oxford from New College as a scholar from Winchester on 22 March 1609, aged sixteen-and-a-half.<sup>3</sup> As was the custom, he was subsequently elected to a probationary fellowship. He departed some time before mid-June 1613, when he was admitted to the Inner Temple and embarked on a career in the law.<sup>4</sup> This was cut short when his elder brother died and he succeeded to the family estates. He then took his place in the public life of the county, becoming a justice of the peace (from 1624), a captain of militia horse (from 1626), a deputy lieutenant and, in 1637–8, sheriff. He also sat in Parliament for Guildford in 1624 and again between December 1645 and his death in March 1648, although he made relatively little impact on parliamentary records.<sup>5</sup> In his public life he was remembered for his longstanding loyalty to his friend Sir Richard Onslow, a leading Surrey gentleman who galvanised support for moderate parliamentarianism in the county during the civil wars. According to Stoughton's nephew, as the pair administered Surrey together at this period, Stoughton 'was reckoned the head for penning' and Onslow 'the mouth for speaking'.<sup>6</sup> Together they resisted more radical and militant parliamentarians locally and kept would-be royalists from open dissent.<sup>7</sup>

The nephew's description of Stoughton as 'a man of great parts [and] a good scholar' once seemed perhaps mere boasting by a family member.<sup>8</sup> The year he left Oxford Stoughton had contributed commendatory verses to *The Dove*, a work by New College fellow Richard Zouche, but such compositions were often formulaic.<sup>9</sup> However, digital resources yield evidence to back up the claim, and to demonstrate that Stoughton had almost certainly taken university study seriously. The Hartlib Papers Online, as its website proclaims, represents 'a complete electronic edition' of over 25,000 folios of correspondence belonging to Samuel Hartlib (c. 1600–1662), the German-born Anglo-Pole "'intelligencer" and man of science' who 'set out to record all human knowledge and make it universally available for the education of all mankind'.<sup>10</sup> Its search engine reveals that Stoughton was among the men and women from all over Europe who were part of his network. In late 1641 and early 1642, against a backdrop of escalating political dissension in England and rumours of rebellion and massacre in Ireland, Stoughton was receiving material from Hartlib and copying it with the assistance of his wife Anne and brother-in-law John Evans. He then distributed it among MPs and others of his

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<sup>1</sup> For a definitive overview of the context, see *History of the University of Oxford, IV: The Seventeenth Century*, ed. Nicholas Tyacke (Oxford, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> E.g. 'The undergraduate account book of John and Richard Newdigate', ed. Vivienne Larminie, *Camden Miscellany* 30 (Camden Society, 4th series, 29, 1990), pp. 149–269.

<sup>3</sup> NCA 9750; Foster, *Alumni Oxonienses*.

<sup>4</sup> <<http://www.innertemplearchives.org.uk/index.asp>>.

<sup>5</sup> <<https://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1604-1629/member/stoughton-nicholas-1592-1648>>;

'Nicholas Stoughton', draft article 'History of Parliament: House of Commons 1640–1660'.

<sup>6</sup> British Library, Add. MS 6174, fols. 141v–42r.

<sup>7</sup> John Gurney, 'George Wither and Surrey politics', *Southern History* 19 (1997), pp. 74–98.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Richard Zouche, *The Dove* (London, 1613), sg. [A4]v.

<sup>10</sup> <[www.hrionline.ac.uk/hartlib/](http://www.hrionline.ac.uk/hartlib/)> (hereafter 'Hartlib Papers'). See also 'Samuel Hartlib', ODNB.

acquaintance, making sure Hartlib's petitions reached Parliament. Well aware, as he told Hartlib, that the 'present unfitness of the condition of our church and state' rendered the moment 'scarce ripe' to promote a reforming agenda, he none the less persevered, at least to the eve of the opening battle of the war.<sup>11</sup>

In his letters Stoughton also demonstrated a keen interest in promoting the work of two of Hartlib's closest associates—the Moravian-born theologian and educationist Jan Amos Komensky (1592–1670), usually known in England as Comenius, and the Scottish-born preacher and ecumenist John Durie or Dury (1596–1680).<sup>12</sup> When he heard that Comenius was visiting Hartlib, Stoughton 'could no longer containe my self from writing'. 'All that we have seen' of Comenius' works 'we do exceedingly well like of. He hoped 'ere long, to haue opportunity to bee acquainted with him, & to bee acquainted from him in particular of the manner of his proceeding, wherto wee should bee glad any way wee may to cooperate'.<sup>13</sup> In the meantime, he sent the visitor a generous present of £20. Four months later, in another letter, he explained how much 'we'—the identity of the others is not specified, but seems to be his wife and brother-in-law—'are solicitous of his health and welfare, & long to heare of his good progress in his worthy work'.<sup>14</sup> The day after Charles I raised the royal standard in Nottingham and called on his subjects to join the fight against his enemies, Stoughton, who was mustering militia on the other side, returned to Hartlib a manuscript of Comenius's 'Via Lucis' ('Way of Light'), which he had just had copied, commenting, 'I would to God I could hear of the 'Via Pacis' ('Way of Peace'), that might second the 'Via Lucis' and establish it'.<sup>15</sup>

As for John Dury's plans for forging closer ties between the European protestant churches, Stoughton had 'not only perused [them] my self, but recommended to the perusal of others', finding 'a very good concurrent both of the one and the other'. He confessed to Hartlib that the 'feasibleness' of Dury's schemes to unite different protestant churches—which after all were devised against a backdrop of international political and religious conflict (the 'Thirty Years' War)—might be questioned owing to 'so much divided, nay opposed interests', but pronounced that his 'end is good, his endeavours glorious'.<sup>16</sup> For this reason, he disseminated his ideas—and Comenius's—even though he recognised the difficulties. Receiving from Hartlib a package, 'so soon after as I could haue convenient opportunity', he 'dispersed most of the books . . . into the hands of such of mine acquaintance, as I conceaued likeliest & ablest to promote such ecclesiastick & scholastick vndertakings'. All the recipients 'approved' and 'applauded . . . the designs', but he recognised sadly that was 'a very rare thing to find many if any, who relish or take to hart, such publike enterprises as bring not or promise not some present & particular aduantage, to themselues; Especially if they bee such, as require considerable pecuniarie assistance'.<sup>17</sup>

As Stoughton's own comments imply, he was probably exceptionally dedicated, but he was not unique. Comenius referred to him in a draft letter of 1641 or 1642 as 'Mr Stoughton, the blessed one' and insisted in a May 1646 letter to Stoughton and two other 'respected patrons and supporters', Kentish gentleman and virtuoso Sir Cheney Culpeper and educationist and preacher Hezekiah Woodward, that they were 'inscribed upon my heart'.<sup>18</sup> Dury sent greetings from The Hague to friends including Stoughton and Sir William Waller, the MP and future parliamentary military commander.<sup>19</sup> It is clear, indeed, that Stoughton's engagement with their

<sup>11</sup> Hartlib Papers, 46/12/5A–46/12/21A.

<sup>12</sup> 'Johannes Amos Comenius', 'John Durie', *ODNB*.

<sup>13</sup> Stoughton to Hartlib, 28 September 1641, Hartlib Papers 46/12/5A.

<sup>14</sup> Stoughton to Hartlib, 17 January 1642, Hartlib Papers 46/12/15A–16B.

<sup>15</sup> Stoughton to Hartlib, 23 August 1642, Hartlib Papers, 46/12/19A.

<sup>16</sup> Stoughton to Hartlib, 30 May 1641, Hartlib Papers, 46/12/1A.

<sup>17</sup> Stoughton to Hartlib, 28 September 1641, Hartlib Papers, 46/12/5A.

<sup>18</sup> Comenius to ?, 7/17 February 1641 [or 1642?], Hartlib Papers, 7/84/3A Comenius to Culpeper, Stoughton and Woodward, 24 May 1646, Hartlib Papers, 7/74/1A–2B; 'Sir Cheney Culpeper', 'Hezekiah Woodward', *ODNB*.

<sup>19</sup> Dury to Hartlib, 8/18 June 1642, Hartlib Papers, 2/9/4A.

reforming interests was both long-lasting and sustained in well-developed social circles. In 1648 Bohemian-born Georg Ritschel, who had been sent to England by Comenius and then found it so welcoming he had declined to rejoin his mentor in Prussia, dedicated to Stoughton and Culpeper his *Contemplationes Metaphysicae*.<sup>20</sup>

Doubtless various factors during Stoughton's adult life combined to draw him in to the fellowship of those who sought to acquire learning and through it to improve the world in which they lived. For instance, his wife and brother-in-law, the companions of his copying endeavours, came from the London mercantile elite among whom Hartlib gained a particular hearing, while, like other Surrey gentlemen, Stoughton was probably induced by commercial considerations to participate in a scheme to open up navigation on the River Wey.<sup>21</sup> However, his engagement in international theological matters may in at least some measure be traced back to Oxford. At New College he had studied under William Twisse (1577/8–1646), who was then gaining a reputation as a scholar and controversialist, who was later to emerge as a champion of Calvinism on the European stage, and who was finally (June 1643) to become prolocutor of the Westminster Assembly.<sup>22</sup> That a college relationship that might have been fleeting and superficial was in fact otherwise, is suggested by another link in the chain. Twisse himself had been a student of George Abbot of Balliol, who as archbishop of Canterbury (1611–1633) was another man committed to promoting international protestant unity.<sup>23</sup> Abbot's family was powerful and popular in Stoughton's home town of Guildford, and controlled at least one of the borough's parliamentary seats—the one to which Stoughton was elected.<sup>24</sup> In 1628 the archbishop recommended Stoughton to the corporation as an advisor for a scheme of poor relief, a further area where men disposed to reform their society might place their energies.<sup>25</sup>

The complex web of connections which made any young man's stay at Oxford potentially more than just an interlude conferring a superficial social polish may be hard to retrieve and reconstruct. It may be impossible to trace the intellectual tastes of adulthood with any certainty back to undergraduate encounters. However, Stoughton's example illustrates that those who passed through Oxford making a minimal impact on its records can turn out to be the kind of men who should have benefitted from the experience. That Stoughton valued education is seen by his will, drawn up on 28 February 1648, which left his books to his nephew expressly to encourage him in learning and which left property to the corporation of Guildford for the benefit of its library and free school.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Georg Ritschel, *Contemplationes metaphysicae* (Oxford, 1648), n.p.; 'Georg Ritschel', *ODNB*.

<sup>21</sup> 'Nicholas Stoughton', draft article 'History of Parliament: House of Commons 1640–1660'.

<sup>22</sup> 'William Twisse', *ODNB*.

<sup>23</sup> 'George Abbot (1562–1633)', *ODNB*.

<sup>24</sup> 'Guildford', draft article 'History of Parliament: House of Commons 1640–1660'.

<sup>25</sup> *The History and Description of Guildford* (Guildford, 1801), p. 19.

<sup>26</sup> The National Archives, PRO, PROB11/203/360.