

New College of Magic and Wizardry: A Second Note on the 1566/7 Visitation*

New College Chapel, Friday 20 September 1566: ‘On this day and place Peter Hampden, a good and distinguished man of noble birth, personally came before Master George Acworth, [who] was sitting judicially in judgement [*iudicialiter et pro tribunali sedente*]. He presented to the same Lord Judge the letters of commission of the foresaid Reverend Father [the Bishop of Winchester, Robert Horne], which were addressed to him, and he beseeched him to proceed according to their power, form and effect. The Lord reverently examined and received these from the hands of the said Peter Hampden because of the honour of so great a commitment and because of the reverence and obedience owed to His person [Bishop Horne]. The same Master George Acworth accepted and took on him the burden of the foresaid commission and he decreed that we are to proceed according to their tenor and effect. He gave them to me, the before mentioned Robert Knaplock notary public and foresaid registrar, to read out publicly’.¹

Thus began the 1566/1567 Visitation of New College by a representative of its Visitor, Robert Horne, a Protestant exile under Mary and Elizabeth’s appointment as Bishop of Winchester. We can only speculate what the warden, fellows and scholars made of the commission read out to them by Knaplock ‘in a high and intelligible voice’.² Perhaps, it made this group of cryptocatholics think of the Spanish Inquisition. Certainly, Acworth was to oblige each and every one of them ‘to speak and declare the plain and bare truth according to requirements of your statutes’.³ Coming as it did two weeks after Queen Elizabeth’s visit to Oxford the commission also took the airs of a wholesale royal visitation and it left some members of the College feeling terrified.⁴ The reaction of former members, which I studied in a previous New College Note, is easier to gauge. Thomas Stapleton raged publicly against Horne’s violations of the laws of God and grammar.⁵ Stapleton was one of many famous Catholic scholars produced by the College in the early and mid-sixteenth century. The same list also features Nicholas Sanders (the author of *The Rise and Growth of the Anglican Schism*), Owen Lewis (later an assistant to Carlo Borromeo, Archbishop of Milan), John Fowler (a printer of Catholic books in Antwerp and Louvain), and John and Nicholas Harpsfield (close collaborators of

* I would like to thank New College’s archivist, Jennifer Thorp, for her help with this Note. It would not have happened without her wisdom and encouragement.

¹ Bodleian Library, MS Top. Oxon. C. 354, fols. 23–4: ‘Quibus die et loco coram magistro Georgio Acworth antedicto iudicialiter et pro tribunali sedente comparuit personaliter probus et discretus vir Petrus Hampden generosus et presentavit eidem domino iudici litteras commissionales Reverendi patris antedicti, sibi directas, ac petiit iuxta earum vim, formam et effectum procedendum fore. Quibus reverenter a manibus dicti Petri Hampden per dominum inspectis et receptis ob honorem tanti committentis ac reverentiam et obedientiam personae suae debitas. Idem magister Georgius Acworth suscepit et acceptavit in se onus commissionis praefatae et procedendum fore decrevit iuxta earum tenorem et effectum mihi prae-fato Roberto Knaplock, notario publico [et] registrario antedicto, publice perlegendum dedit’. MS Top. Oxon. C. 354 is an early twentieth-century manuscript copy of Horne’s original register. Its transcription from the original is (as pencil corrections indicate) at times incorrect. I have corrected spelling, capitalisation, and punctuation, where necessary.

² *Ibid.*, fol. 24: ‘alta et intelligibile voce’.

³ New College Archives, MS 3688/1, fol. 1: ‘vos omnes et singulos iuxta statutorum vestrorum exigentiam iureiurando astrinxerit de dicendo et denuntiando plenam et meram veritatem’. MS 3688/1 is a late seventeenth-century copy of the injunctions issued by Robert Horne, and his successors Thomas Bilson and George Morley. MS 3093 is a Victorian copy of the injunctions following the 1566/1567 visitation alone. Cf. the injunction in the College statutes for members to speak the truth (and not make false accusations) in front of the Visitor or his commissioners in: E. A. Bond, ed., *Statutes of the Colleges of Oxford*, vol. 1 (Oxford: J. H. Parker, 1853), sec. New College, p. 110.

⁴ The Queen visited Oxford from 31 August to 6 September 1566. See the documents collected in John Nichol, *The Progresses and Public Processions of Queen Elizabeth: A New Edition of the Early Modern Sources*, vol. I: 1533–1571, ed. Elizabeth Goldring et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 447–671. For the Royal character of the commission, see n. 40 below.

⁵ Jan Machielsen, ‘[Thomas Stapleton’s First Polemic: An Impact Case Study](#)’, *New College Notes* 5 (2014), no. 10.

Reginald Pole, Mary Tudor's Archbishop of Canterbury). Elizabeth's accession led a number of Catholics, Stapleton among them, to flee to the continent. Others were expelled, but Bishop Horne, as a committed evangelical, still watched the College with a wary eye. Acworth and his colleagues were sent to root out a nest of cryptopapists. In the process these men were to uncover two practising magicians as well.

The 1566/67 Visitation has long, by common consent, been regarded as 'one of the most minutely recorded events in the history of the College'.⁶ Knaplock, the notary public, was a diligent scribe and recorded the religious and moral failings of the warden and fellows in minute detail. The Visitation is, however, also one of the least well-known events in College history. Its principal aim was to persuade all members to subscribe to the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion. This proved to a long-drawn out process, yet after much hand-wringing only two fellows refused and were expelled. One of these, John Munden (or Mundryn), became a Jesuit missionary and was executed at Tyburn in 1582.⁷ In the process, the commissioners visited the College three times in the course of nearly a year. Their first visit began, as already noted, on 20 September 1566 and lasted for at least one week (the end date is not recorded). Acworth returned on 18 March the following year and stayed until the 21st.⁸ Finally, Horne's representatives returned on 2 September for a final inspection. The Visitation wrapped up at 1 pm the next day with a final speech by Acworth, still 'seated judicially in judgement', the Warden, Subwarden, and other fellows, scholars and ministers of the said College came forth, each and every one of whom Lord [Acworth] warned and vehemently exhorted in a Latin oration . . . to desist from papistry and all idolatry and henceforth to properly cling to Sacred Scripture'.⁹

Though clearly focussed on uprooting popery the commissioners also confronted the College's many moral failings. Perhaps the most serious charge on this front was levelled against Warden Thomas White (or Whyte), one of only two Oxford men who (barely) survived Elizabeth's accession as head of house.¹⁰ The arrival of the commissioners prompted a substantial part of the fellowship to line up against him. Among the many accusations made was the claim that:

a certain maid [*puella*] who served you [White] in the rectory at Stanton St John had become pregnant several years ago and died after having taken medication to procure an abortion. A widely spread report [or rumour; *fama*] on this matter rouses the gravest suspicion of unchastity against you.¹¹

White, doubtless one of the most unsavoury wardens in College history, reported that the girl had become pregnant by 'a certain Richard', his cook and manservant. Once he learned of her

⁶ Hastings Rashdall and Robert S. Rait, *New College: University of Oxford College Histories* (London: F. E. Robinson & Co., 1901), p. 115. Penry Williams, 'Reformation to Reform, 1530–1850', in John Buxton and Penry Williams, eds, *New College, 1379–1979* (Oxford: Oxpriint, 1979), p. 50, describes the visitation as 'the most elaborate of all these enquiries'.

⁷ For Munden being 'vehementer suspecti' of papism, see MS Top. Oxon. C. 354, fol. 36.

⁸ Or 1566 Old Style; Cf. MS Top. Oxon. C. 354, fol. 108.

⁹ MS Top. Oxon. C. 354, fol. 138: 'iudicialiter et pro tribunali sedente comparuerunt dicti custos, vicecustos ac caeteri socii, scholares et ministri dicti Collegii quos omnes et singulos oratione latina . . . dominus monuit et vehementer hortabatur ut a papismo et omni idolatria desistant et sacris litteris debite dehinc inhereant'.

¹⁰ For evangelical criticisms of White, see Penry Williams, 'Elizabethan Oxford: State, Church and University' in James McConica, ed., *The History of the University of Oxford*, vol. III: The Collegiate University (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), pp. 397–440, at 407.

¹¹ MS Top. Oxon. C. 354, fol. 28: 'quaedam puella subministrans tibi in Rectoriam de Staunton et paucos abhinc annos gravida facta, medicamentis ad abigendum partus sumptis moriebatur, cuius rei fama late dissipata gravissimam suspicionem incontinentiae adversus te concitavit'. The Bodleian copy reads 'ad abigendis partum' but as a pencil-written 'sic' notes, this cannot be grammatically correct. The accusation is the 56th in a list of 73 charges. See also Rashdall and Rait, *New College*, pp. 115–24.

condition, he evicted her (though apparently not the cook) from his house. She subsequently died of exposure.¹²

Horne's injunctions, dated 10 September 1567, issued upon the completion of the visitation, give a more general sense of the moral as well as physical state of the College. The communal privy 'called the Longhouse' was to be cleaned.¹³ Senior fellows should not dawdle near the college gate after dinner 'spinning idle stories for a considerable time as a bad example for younger ones'.¹⁴ Women were banned from 'the buttery, any bedroom or any place within the College'.¹⁵ Members were forbidden to feed dogs or birds (think hawks rather than pigeons; the college statutes prohibited hunting).¹⁶ Most disturbingly, 'those who live in the upper bedrooms should not pour or throw out through the windows any water, urine, or any form of filth harming those below'.¹⁷ (Perhaps the commissioners had a bad experience?)

The admission of magical practices must be placed within this context of a long drawn out and public investigation into the life of the College. It came on 2 September 1567, the first day of the last session. Possibly the strain of the investigations became too much. That morning Acworth had questioned all the members of the College individually 'whether they had anything to relate since the last prorogation of this visitation was made and he warned them all to present and relate in writing if they had anything between the hours of one and three in the afternoon'.¹⁸ The person who admitted to owning a book of spells that afternoon was one of the college's youngest members, likely no more than 18 or 19 years old at the time.¹⁹ Thomas Hopkins had arrived at the College in 1564 and had not yet obtained his BA.²⁰ Throughout the first two sessions Hopkins had been almost daily urged to subscribe to the Articles of Religion. Even after having been declared contumacious and threatened with punishment Hopkins refused. When his resistance group finally capitulated, he remained the last to subscribe.²¹ In a separate case Hopkins admitted to feeding birds but pleaded with Acworth that the warden and deans had already sufficiently punished him.²² The afternoon when he made his admission began with Acworth attempting to expel all members of the College who were absent.²³ Perhaps the strain became too much. In any case, this is what Knaplock, notary public and our faithful scribe, reported happened:

¹² Ibid., fols. 40–1.

¹³ New College Archive, MS 3688, fol. 2 [no. 1].

¹⁴ Ibid., fol. 4 [no. 35]: 'fabulis otiosis diu tempus textentes in exemplum malum omnium iuniorum?.'

¹⁵ Ibid. [no. 34]: 'Ne admittantur aliquae mulieres neque in promptuarium neque aliquod cubiculum neque in locum ullum infra Collegium?.'

¹⁶ Ibid., fol. 3 [no. 23]. Cf. Bond, ed, *Statutes*, p. 48 [Rubric 25], where the keeping or other use of 'aves accipitres' was forbidden.

¹⁷ NC, MS 3688, fol. 3 [no. 31]: 'Ne effundant aut emittant illi qui sunt in superioribus cubiculis quicquam aquae aut urinae aut sordium aliquarum per fenestras inferioribus nocentes?.'

¹⁸ MS Top. Oxon. C. 354, fol. 134: 'dominus separatim interrogavit dictos Custodem, Vicecustodem et ceteros socios, scholares ac ministros eiusdem Collegii utrum aliquid haberent proponendum citra ultimam prorogationem huiusmodi [huius?] visitationis factam et monuit eos omnes ad exhibendum et proponendum in scriptis si quid habuerint inter horas primam et tertiam post meridiem huius diei in loco predicto?.'

¹⁹ Hopkins's age is not known, yet the median age at matriculation (in 1605–7) was 16.9 years: Stephen Porter, 'University and Society' in Nicholas Tyacke, ed., *The History of the University of Oxford*, vol. IV: Seventeenth-Century Oxford, pp. 25–104 at 56.

²⁰ See the entry in Joseph Foster, ed, *Alumni Oxonienses, 1500-1714*, 4 vols (Oxford: James Parker & co., 1891), vol. 2, p. 744.

²¹ MS Top. Oxon. C. 354, fols. 31 (when he recused himself for the first time), 32 (the next day when he refused again), 110–11 (Acworth 'pronunciavit eos omnes et singulos contumaces, et ex gracia reservavit earum poenas in crastinum diem'), 118 (refusal on 20 March), 125–26 (subscription on 21 March).

²² Ibid., fols. 118–19.

²³ Ibid., fols. 134–35.

Then Hopkins came forth who confessed to [possessing] a book with written conjurations, which he said he obtained from Lord Fisher, who stepping forth admitted to having had a book of this sort from a certain Master Beale, a Master of Arts from Christ Church, Oxford. Lord [Acworth] warned both to be present here [in chapel] the next day between eight and nine in the morning.²⁴

Master Beale, the purveyor of magical books, can only have been William Beale (or Bele), who was a student of Christ Church from 1559 to 1572 and had obtained his MA in 1565 or 1566. Little else is known about him.²⁵ More interesting and an altogether different figure from Hopkins was John Fisher. He was probably a few years older and certainly more senior than Hopkins, having arrived at New on 2 October 1562 and already taken his BA.²⁶ He also caused Acworth considerably more inconvenience. When the judge had attempted to expel absent members that fateful afternoon, Fisher had interjected that ‘other fellows were detained in town on business’ which forced the judge to delay making good on his threats once again.²⁷ In fact, Fisher had posed a problem from the start. Perhaps not surprising for a man who shared his name with a Catholic martyr, he roundly admitted during the first session to possessing and reading a substantial number of prohibited Catholic books.²⁸ A few days later he was accused of laughing during a church service and of ‘drink[ing] up all the wine in mockery of the Holy Supper’.²⁹ When Fisher denied these charges and produced witnesses [*compurgatores*] Acworth refused to postpone their swearing in ‘to avoid perjury’.³⁰ It is not odd that such a contrarian man dabbled in magic.

The story of Thomas Hopkins, John Fisher, and their book of spells is part of a much larger story. Witchcraft intersected with academic life in numerous ways. In Germany, the *Carolina*, the Imperial code promulgated by Charles V mandated that courts consult the law faculty of a nearby university in difficult witchcraft cases. Thousands of such legal opinions survive.³¹ Less attention has paid to the ways in which witchcraft was discussed and even practised within Europe’s universities at the time but their importance received some recognition.³² Keith Thomas already noticed the subject’s widespread and diverse academic appeal. Writing at the tail end of the 1960s he observed that magic ‘seems to have been the equivalent of drug-taking today as the fashionable temptation for undergraduates’.³³ The archives of the University of Tübingen still possess two devil’s pacts confiscated from the students who

²⁴ Ibid., fol. 135: ‘Ac tunc comparuit Hopkins qui fatebatur quendam librum coniuracionum scriptorum, quem aiebat se habuisse a domino Fissher, qui comparens fatebatur se habuisse huiusmodi librum a quodam magistro Beale, artium magistro Ecclesiae Christi Oxoniensis, quos quidem Hopkins et Fissher Dominus monuit ad interessendum hic in crastinum inter horas octavam et nonam ante meridiem’.

²⁵ For the dates of Beale’s degrees, see Foster, ed., *Alumni Oxonienses*, vol. 1, p. 95. I am grateful to Christ Church’s archivist, Judith Curthoys, for information on Beale’s arrival and departure.

²⁶ C.W. Boase, ed., *Register of the University of Oxford*, vol. I: 1449–63; 1505–71 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1885), p. 259.

²⁷ MS Top. Oxon. C. 354, fol. 134: ‘aliis in oppido detentum negotiis’.

²⁸ Ibid., fol. 29. John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester, was executed in 1535. Nomen est omen? Certainly, Thomas Stapleton, born in the same month as Thomas More’s execution, considered the name his parents gave him as an act of resistance.

²⁹ Ibid., fol. 38: ‘vinum omne ebibit in ludibrium sanctae cenae’.

³⁰ Ibid., fol. 39: ‘evitando periurium’. *Compurgatores* are sworn witnesses to the innocence or character of the accused person.

³¹ Robert Zagolla, *Folter und Hexenprozess: die strafrechtliche Spruchpraxis der Juristenfakultät Rostock im 17. Jahrhundert* (Bielefeld: Verlag für Regionalgeschichte, 2007); Marianne Sauter, *Hexenprozess und Folter: die strafrechtliche Spruchpraxis der Juristenfakultät Tübingen im 17. und beginnenden 18. Jahrhundert* (Bielefeld: Verlag für Regionalgeschichte, 2010).

³² For a case study, see Claudia Kauertz, *Wissenschaft und Hexenglaube: Die Diskussion des Zauber- und Hexenwesens an der Universität Helmstedt, 1576–1626* (Bielefeld: Verlag für Regionalgeschichte, 2001).

³³ Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London: Penguin, 1991 [orig. ed. 1971]), pp. 268–69.

had signed them.³⁴ The infamous *Malleus maleficarum* (1486) reported how during a bout of competitive beer drinking one cursing student got carried away by the devil.³⁵ The Bordeaux lawyer Pierre de Lancre reported how students got suspicious when one of their own, a boy aged about 14, wrote a poem ‘as good as or better than Vergil’. When the rumour circulated that he had made a pact with the devil, ‘this perfection and excellence ceased soon afterwards’.³⁶ (One wonders why.)

How, then, did things end for our two amateur magicians? Hopkins was warned that ‘henceforth he should apply his mind more diligently to letters, and he should not in any way use the magical art or support it in future’.³⁷ He was threatened with punishment (*sub poena*) if he did not obey. Hopkins remained at New College until 1568. Whether or not he ended up taking a degree is unclear. If he did, he was probably the ‘Thomas Hopkins, BA’ whom Robert Horne ordained in 1572 as a curate at Nursling in Hampshire. In 1584, this Thomas Hopkins became vicar of Longparish and Middleton a mere five miles from ‘our’ Hopkins’s native Andover. He passed away in 1611.³⁸ Fisher came to a more ignoble end. In 1573 his supplication for an MA degree was refused on account of his having written a popish libel entitled ‘A Knack to Know a Knave’ which circulated in manuscript.³⁹ Shortly after the College wrote to its Visitor (Horne) whether Fisher should continue to enjoy the benefits of his fellowship in light of this refusal and on account of the papistical books found ‘in front of the venerable commissioners of Her Majesty the Queen’, that is the 1566–67 Visitation.⁴⁰ Horne’s answer, evidently, was no, as Fisher vanishes from college records. What happened to our popish magician afterwards is unknown. Perhaps he magically disappeared.

Jan Machielsen
Cardiff University
(formerly New College, Oxford)

³⁴ Thomas Hilarius Meyer, ‘Systematische Theologie, katechetische Strenge und pädagogisches Augenmaß: Die Tübinger Theologen und die Hexenverfolgungen am Beispiel Jakob Heerbrands’, in Ulrich Köpf, Sönke Lorenz, and Dieter R. Bauer, eds, *Die Universität Tübingen zwischen Reformation und Dreißigjährigem Krieg* (Ostfildern: Jan Thorbecke, 2010), pp. 165–80.

³⁵ Christopher S. Mackay, trans., *The Hammer of Witches: A Complete Translation of the Malleus Maleficarum* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 295.

³⁶ Pierre de Lancre, *Tableau des mauvais anges et demons* (Paris, 1612), p. 176: ‘faisoit aussi bien ou mieux que Virgile ... cette perfection et ex[c]ellence cessa bien tost après’.

³⁷ MS Top. Oxon. C. 354, fols. 136–37: ‘dominus monuit Hopkins quod deinceps animum suum litteris diligentius applicet neve arte magica aliquo modo utatur aut ei faveat in posterum sub poena’.

³⁸ See the Clergy of the Church of England database: <<http://db.theclergydatabase.org.uk/>>. Entry no. 93702. Hopkins’s religious vocation would certainly not be surprising, as the College was set up specifically with the aim of training secular clergy.

³⁹ Boase, ed., *Register of the University of Oxford*, vol. 1, p. 259.

⁴⁰ New College Archives, MS 9760, fol. 100r [dated only 1573]: ‘coram venerabilibus Serenissimae dominae Reginae Commissariis’. I am tremendously grateful to Jennifer Thorp for transcribing this curious letter for me. Penry Williams has noted that Elizabeth’s visit ‘almost deserves the name of visitation’: Williams, ‘Elizabethan Oxford’, p. 397. Certainly, the letter cannot refer to the 1559 Royal commission which visited the University as Fisher had not yet arrived at New College at that time. Warden White was one of the dignitaries to receive the Queen at Woodstock on 31 August and carry her canopy to Christ Church, where she stayed for the duration of her visit: Nichol, *The Progresses and Public Processions*, vol. 1, pp. 471, 474 [account by Miles Windsor, a student at Corpus]. Several members of the royal delegation, including the Earl of Leicester and the Spanish ambassador, visited New College on 2 September: *ibid.*, pp. 476 [account by Windsor], 533 [by Nicholas Robinson].