

Chasing Provenance: Apuleius's 250-Year Journey from Robert Dow's All Souls' to James Edwards Sewell's New College



New College Library, Oxford, BT1.135.16

New College BT1.135.16 is a volume of writings by the 2nd-century Roman author Apuleius, published in Venice by the Aldine Press in 1521, which includes at the end an item in Greek by Alcinous ('Alcinoi philosophi ad Platonis dogmata introductio'). There is evidence of previous ownership on the book itself, with four names inscribed towards the front: Robert Dow, on the manuscript pastedown and the title page; Henry Dow, also on the manuscript pastedown; Giles [in the Latin form, Ægidius] Tomson, on the title page; and Thomas Bramston, on the first page of the preface. The book has been rebacked in the relatively recent past, the College bookplate on the inside of the upper board is dated 1954 and only one shelfmark is present: W.8.10.

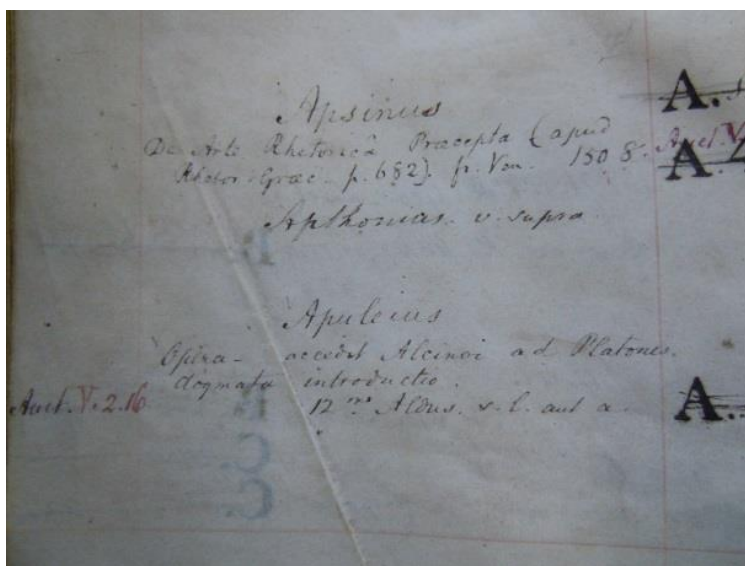
With no clear indication of how the book actually came to be in the possession of New College, it was decided to look further within library records in an attempt to establish when it first appeared. An obvious place to start was in old classification indexes, of which a good number from the seventeenth century onwards have survived.

A small handwritten catalogue of the 'Omega shelves' (LC/117) exists. It is undated but a label for the bookseller, Emberlin & Son, who were located in Broad Street, Oxford between 1921 and 1939, allows for a very rough date to be assigned to the creation of the Omega shelfmarks. It is possible to conclude this because the catalogue usefully lists the 'old shelf no.' for all the titles. The Apuleius in question previously had the shelfmark V.2.16 (a number which today does not appear on the book itself); the relevant catalogue also still exists, simply marked 'V' (LC/25) and clearly dated 1847. It is one of a number of physically small and slim volumes recording library holdings, each one dedicated to an individual classification letter and (in most cases) dated to the years 1845-47.

It can be established therefore that the Apuleius volume was definitely resident in New College Library in 1847, but how much further back in time can it be traced? Amongst the individual shelfmark and subject catalogues that still exist for the years pre-1847 are four large tomes that are apparently full library catalogues—the complete alphabetical holdings of

New College Library for that (and subsequent) years. They are clearly dated 1650 (LC/2), 1654 (LC/3), 1729 (LC/10) and 1754 (LC/OS/1). Both the 1650 and the larger, much more extensive, catalogue from 1654 list two titles by Apuleius, an ‘Opera’ published in Venice in 1493 and ‘Aureus Asinus cum annot. Beroaldi’, from Venice in 1510. The 1654 book adds copies of ‘De virtutibus Herbarum’, variously 1529, 1543 and 1547. The entries in the 1729 catalogue exactly match those in 1654, only the shelfmarks have changed.

The pages of the even larger, and generally more unwieldy, 1754 book are divided in two, the original entries in this catalogue arranged down the inner column; the outer was left blank for the recording of later additions. The main Apuleius entries match those from 1654 and 1729—but in the outer column, alongside these originals, is the later addition: ‘Apuleius Opera—accedit Alcinoi ad Platonis dogmata introductio, 12mo. Aldus’, with shelfmark V.2.16.



Catalogus librorum qui extant in bibliotheca Collegii beatae Mariae Winton in Oxon. (1754)
New College Library, Oxford, LC/OS/1

So the presence of this copy of Apuleius was initially recorded between 1754 and 1847 (the date of the individual ‘V’ index). Further examination of the catalogue clearly indicates that it was still in use in the mid-1840s. The Librarian at that time was James Edwards Sewell, the future Warden of New College, who was elected on 10 June 1842, was still in post in 1847 and for whom examples of handwriting exist in the Archives to be able to show it was he who created the entry for the Apuleius. It seems likely, given that it is also his handwriting in the slim subject indexes of 1845-47, that he decided that the cumbersome 1754 catalogue should be superseded by smaller, more user-friendly volumes.

It can reasonably be stated, therefore, that the book in question was first recorded in New College Library ownership between 1842 and 1847. This is not to say, of course, that it actually *arrived* at College between those dates but it does allow for the establishment of a much clearer approximate date than was previously the case.

A study of the Library Benefaction Book, the principal repository for information on donations of material to the Library, was now deemed in order. Even though the Apuleius was not included at the initial compilation of the 1754 catalogue, to provide the security of a somewhat wider scope to the search, it was decided to view entries in the Benefaction Book from 1740 up until 1860, a full 120 year period. No record of any donation of this item was found. A search of relevant documents in the Archives for the early-mid 1840s produced no evidence of a purchase either. At this point some research into the provenance names present on the book seemed appropriate.

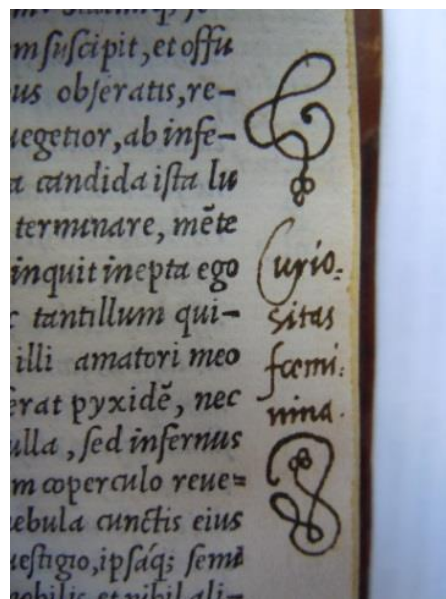
Initially, there are two plain inscriptions, quite possibly in the same hand, one on the reverse of the title page reading: 'Anno Dmi. 1559' and the other at the top of the first page of the preface: 'Liber N[?]eoh[n?]. 1558. [indecipherable]'. It is, however, not possible to say who this scribe may have been.



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The signature of Robert Dow (1553-1588) appears in two places, including the title page. He was the eldest of five sons born to Lettice Bull and Robert Dow (1523-1612). His father was a citizen of London and member of the Merchant Taylors' Company,¹ one of the twelve City Livery companies dating from medieval times (otherwise known as the Guilds). As collector of tonnage and poundage (customs duties and taxes levied on imports and exports) for the port of London, Robert Dow senior was a man of some influence. Robert junior may well have attended the Merchant Taylors' School (his two younger brothers John and Henry did) but there is no firm evidence for this as full registration records were not kept until Robert senior instigated the school's Probation Books in 1607. Dow was apparently admitted to Corpus Christi in Oxford on 14 January 1574 for his B.A. degree (his supplication was 12 October 1573), the evidence for this coming from three letters he wrote to the Lord High Treasurer (and Elizabeth I's chief advisor) Lord Burghley in 1573, and marked 'Oxoniae in Collegio Corporis Christi'. Dow was attempting to gain support for his admittance to All Souls' to study civil law; this did not happen but, on 28 November 1575, he was elected to a Probationary Fellowship there. At the same time he was teaching calligraphy, with Robert Sidney, brother of Sir Philip Sidney and future Earl of Leicester, among his pupils. On 14 January 1577 he was finally admitted to All Souls' as a B.A. student of laws. Dow supplicated for a B.C.L. degree in March 1582 and was admitted the following April. From November 1585 until October 1587 he was Bursar of Laws at All Souls'. His later activities included a contribution to a collection of verse in honour of Sir Philip Sidney and a trip to Poland, possibly on business related to his father's mercantile interests. Robert Dow died, aged 35, on 10 November 1588. An inventory of his belongings, which was presented at a meeting of the Chancellor's Court in Oxford on 7 March 1589, included over 300 books amongst which were his set of music partbooks which are now resident at Christ Church College and regarded as an important source of Elizabethan music. The inventory probably also included the book currently under discussion.

¹ For further information on the Merchant Taylors' Company, see <<http://www.merchant-taylors.co.uk>>.



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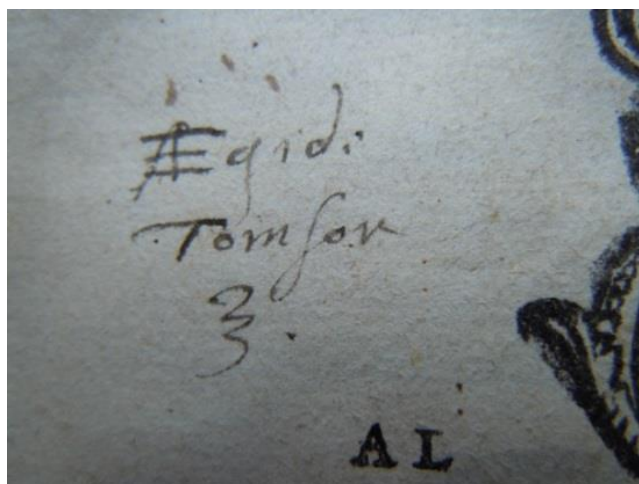
Dow's ownership of the Apuleius is indisputable. It has been confirmed that certain of the marginal annotations in this copy, with their distinctive patterning, are indeed his work.² It may also be possible to surmise how it came to be in his possession, via the second name that appears on the book. Lightly inscribed at the very lower edge of the first manuscript pastedown is the signature of Henry Dow. This is presumably Robert's younger brother, the third son of Robert senior, born in 1557/58, who entered Christ Church in April 1576. While there he fell ill; he joined Robert at All Souls' in an attempt to recuperate, but died on 23 October 1578. It is reasonable to speculate that the Apuleius actually first belonged to Henry and, on his death, passed to his brother.



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An important connection with the inventory of 1589 comes with the other name inscribed on the title page of this volume: Giles Tomson.

² Acknowledgement is made here to James Burke, of the Music Faculty and The Queen's College, Oxford.



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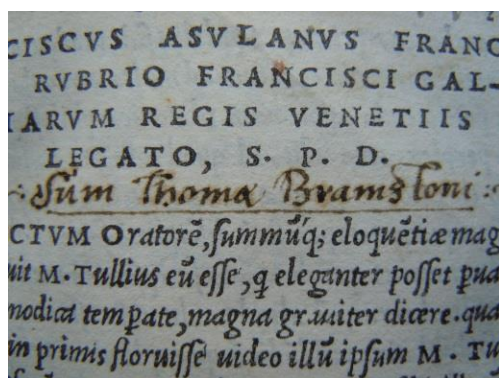
Research by David Mateer³ has indicated it was Tomson (Thomson, Thompson or Tompson) who owned the Christ Church partbooks, which have the initials 'G.T.' on the covers, after Dow's death. Born in 1553, biographers conflict over the name and profession of his father (Giles or Edward Tomson, who was respectively either a London grocer or a mercer). Whereas there is some doubt as to whether Robert Dow attended the Merchant Taylors' School, Giles Tomson certainly did, being admitted on 3 March 1564. He entered University College, Oxford in 1571, graduating B.A. in 1575 and M.A. three years later. Like Dow, he was elected to a Fellowship at All Souls' in 1580, taking his B.D. in 1590 and D.D. in 1602. Having been appointed one of Queen Elizabeth's chaplains in the late 1590s, he became Dean of Windsor in 1603, a position he held until his death in 1612. For the last year of his life he was also Bishop of Gloucester, having been consecrated on 9 June 1611.⁴

As Dow and Tomson were contemporary Fellows and colleagues at All Souls' (and with a possible mutual connection through the Merchant Taylors' School, not to mention being of around the same age), it does seem quite probable that they knew each other. The assumption is that some of Robert Dow's possessions were acquired by Giles Tomson after Dow's death in 1588 and, presumably, after the inventory was produced in 1589. It is known that two books which formerly belonged to Dow passed to the Library of St. George's Chapel in Windsor, and that the partbooks include music written by John Baldwin, a singing-man of St. George's—a direct consequence, it is believed, of Tomson's appointment as Dean of Windsor.

The presence on the New College Apuleius of the full signatures (as opposed to merely initials) of both Dow and Tomson mean that it is reasonable to say that it also passed to Tomson at the same time. However, unlike the partbooks and the books in St. George's, there is nothing on the New College volume to indicate it ever went to a Windsor ownership. Perhaps Giles Tomson kept it for his own personal library and passed it on or sold it separately. His will, proved in July 1612, indicates that he passed to the Chapter Clerk Gregory Baker 'all my songe books' and made him one of the executors of his estate. In turn, when Baker died in December 1637, his son Giles was made his executor and received 'all my song bookes and other bookes not particularly given before'. Did this include the Apuleius or had it already passed on to another owner? It could even be speculated that such a disposal may well have occurred before 1603 and Tomson's arrival at Windsor. In the absence of concrete evidence, it is impossible to say. Even in the case of the Christ Church partbooks, David Mateer admitted the trail goes cold at this point.

³ David Mateer, 'Oxford, Christ Church Music MSS 984-8: An Index and Commentary', *Royal Musical Association Research Chronicle* 20 (1986/87), pp. 1-18.

⁴ For additional information on Giles Tomson, see <<http://kingjamesbibletranslators.org/bios/GilesTomson>>.



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The other name found on the Apuleius is Thomas Bramston. Research brings two names to the attention of anyone searching for New College-related alumni: Thomas Berney Bramston (1733-1813) of Skreens, Essex and Thomas Gardiner Bramston (1770-1831) also of Skreens, Essex.

Thomas Gardiner Bramston was Tory MP for Essex for a short period in 1830. Bramston was descended from a distinguished line, the family based at Skreens in Essex since 1635 when his direct ancestor, Sir John Bramston, who was Lord Chief Justice in 1635-42 under King Charles I, initially bought the estate. One of Sir John's sons, also Sir John, was a lawyer and MP for the county at the Restoration in 1660 and for Maldon in 1679; Thomas Gardiner Bramston's grandfather, also Thomas, *and* his father, Thomas Berney Bramston were both MPs, again for Essex. Crucially, however, both Thomas Berney and Thomas Gardiner took their degrees at New College, in 1751 and 1788 respectively.⁵

As a point of interest, it should also be noted that the manor of Skreens lay in the parish of Roxwell, the original chapel of which was acquired by the Founder and given to New College in 1391. It was also linked to the College properties at nearby Writtle and an annual rent (originally tithes) was still payable to College in the 1840s—the time the Apuleius appeared in library records.

The handwriting of the Thomas Bramston signature, however, appeared to be too early in style to be either nineteenth or even eighteenth century in origin. It was more likely to be no later than around the middle of the seventeenth century. This naturally ended speculation that either Thomas Gardiner or Thomas Berney Bramston could have been the inscribed owner of the Apuleius. Was there a Thomas Bramston further back in time, somewhere in the early to mid-seventeenth century, and connected to these two gentlemen?

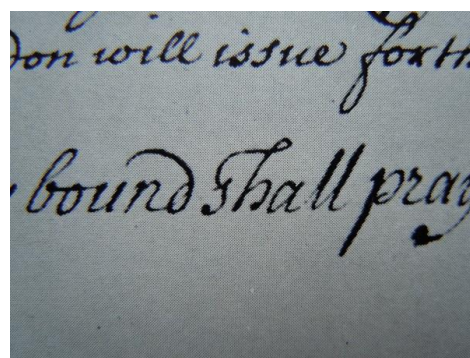
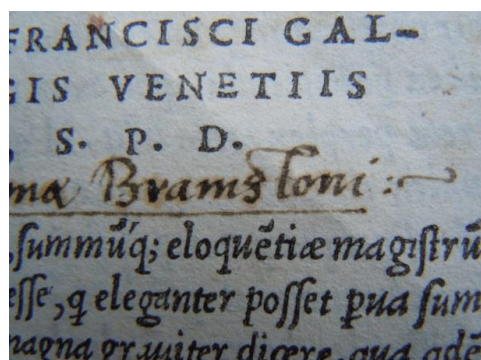
At the front of *The Autobiography of Sir John Bramston, K.B., of Skreens*, published in 1845, is a 'Pedigree of Bramston'.⁶ A son Thomas was born to Hugh Bramston and his wife Elizabeth Norrys (or Norris) in, further research suggests, about 1521 but no additional information about him is readily forthcoming. While not impossible he was the Thomas Bramston whose signature is on the Apuleius, he almost certainly would have been an owner *before* the Dows and Tomson. The book may possibly have found its way back into the family at a later date but such a scenario seems unlikely.

Research of the limited evidence available indicates that two further Bramstons named Thomas died in early childhood. One of these was born to the first Sir John Bramston in 1613. Another of his sons was Sir Moundeford (or Mundeford) Bramston who was a Master in Chancery. This latter gentleman had several sons himself, including Thomas Bramston of Waterhouse, Writtle, Essex who was born in 1658 and died in 1737. Presumably through the influence of his father, he became a clerk in the six clerks' office in Chancery Lane; from consultation of the

⁵ See <<https://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/>>.

⁶ John Bramston, *The Autobiography of Sir John Bramston, K.B., of Skreens, in the Hundred of Chelmsford* (London: Camden Society, 1845).

autobiography of the second Sir John Bramston, he appears to have been in this position by 1690. He was apparently a frequent visitor to his father's family estate at Skreens. In later life, he became MP for Maldon in 1712, remaining in the post until about 1727 when it appears his cousin and namesake Thomas Bramston of Skreens, took over the seat. This latter Thomas, who seems to have been born in around 1690, inherited the manor of Skreens in 1722. While not outside the bounds of possibility, it would appear to be too late for him to be considered a candidate for authorship of the signature. He was, however, the grandfather of Thomas Gardiner Bramston.



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With the style of handwriting of the signature believed to date from no later than the mid-seventeenth century, does the fact that Thomas Bramston of Waterhouse was not born until 1658 rule him out as a possible candidate? Evidence has been found that suggests this may *not* be the case. A published reproduction⁷ of a Petition for Reprieve dated 1682, around the time Thomas seemingly became a clerk in Chancery, reveals a distinctive ligature between the letters 's' and 'h' in the word 'shall' on the last official line. This detail is very similar to that displayed between the letters 's' and 't' in Thomas' surname. This suggests that writing styles may linger in use longer than might be expected, especially when taking into consideration the legal or official nature of the subject's working environment (or even in Thomas' case, his family background).

It is conceivably possible that Thomas Bramston of Waterhouse came into the possession of the book that is now New College BT1.135.16 and wrote his name in it. A hypothetical provenance for this book may be formulated as follows.

The book, published in 1521, was owned by at least one, maybe two, unknown persons in the years 1558 and 1559. It is speculated that the first owner to whom a name can positively be assigned is Henry Dow. On his death in 1578 the book passed to his brother Robert, of All Souls' College; when he died ten years later it was acquired by Giles Tomson along with other material from Dow's collection. The trail is temporarily lost after Tomson. It is possible he disposed of the book from his collection before he became Dean of Windsor in 1603 as there is no evidence it ever became part of a collection there (though there is no reason to suppose he did not keep it for himself). It may have passed on to Gregory and Giles Baker and was sold on from them. It then came into the possession of Thomas Bramston of Waterhouse, a clerk at Chancery, in around the 1680s or 1690s; it is a possibility it was acquired by his father Sir Moundeford Bramston or even his grandfather Sir John Bramston at some point between *c.* 1600 and Thomas' time and passed on to him. Once in the Bramston family, one of some importance and influence for several centuries, it stayed in the collection(s) of subsequent members until it was given to New College from the library of a deceased former student, probably Thomas Gardiner Bramston who died in 1831. The book was then first recorded in a New College library catalogue by Librarian James Edwards Sewell between 1842 and 1847.

⁷ Reproduced (as plate XXVII) in L.C. Hector, *The Handwriting of English Documents*, 2nd ed. (London: Edward Arnold, 1966).

The above summary is speculative, but Robert Dow and Giles Tomson, at least, are linked from evidence left elsewhere in Oxford. Robert Dow's father and his contemporary John Bramston were both professionally involved in London trade and commerce (Bramston being a mercer); their sons, Robert and Roger respectively, both studied law, with Roger Bramston being the father of the first Sir John.⁸ The study and practice of the law was therefore common to Robert Dow and to several generations of Bramston. The New College connection with not only the parish of Roxwell, where the Bramston family estate was located, but also specifically two subsequent members of the Bramston family is undeniable and appears unlikely to be coincidental. Amongst documents in the college archives for Roxwell is a set of correspondence 'about exchanges of land with Mr Bramston and T.J. Hearn' dated 1851-52, 'Mr Bramston' probably being Thomas Gardiner's son and inheritor, Thomas William.⁹ Why was the donation or gift left unrecorded at New College? Perhaps it was nothing more than a simple oversight—purely a case of human error, one book missed amongst the many. The truth may never be known. For now, it is left to the individual to draw their own conclusions as to whether the trail followed into the past on this occasion is the correct one.

Jason Morgan
Assistant Librarian

⁸ See <<https://www.geni.com/people>>.

⁹ For the Roxwell entry in White's *Directory of Essex* (1848), see <<http://www.historyhouse.co.uk/placeR/essexr15a.html>>.