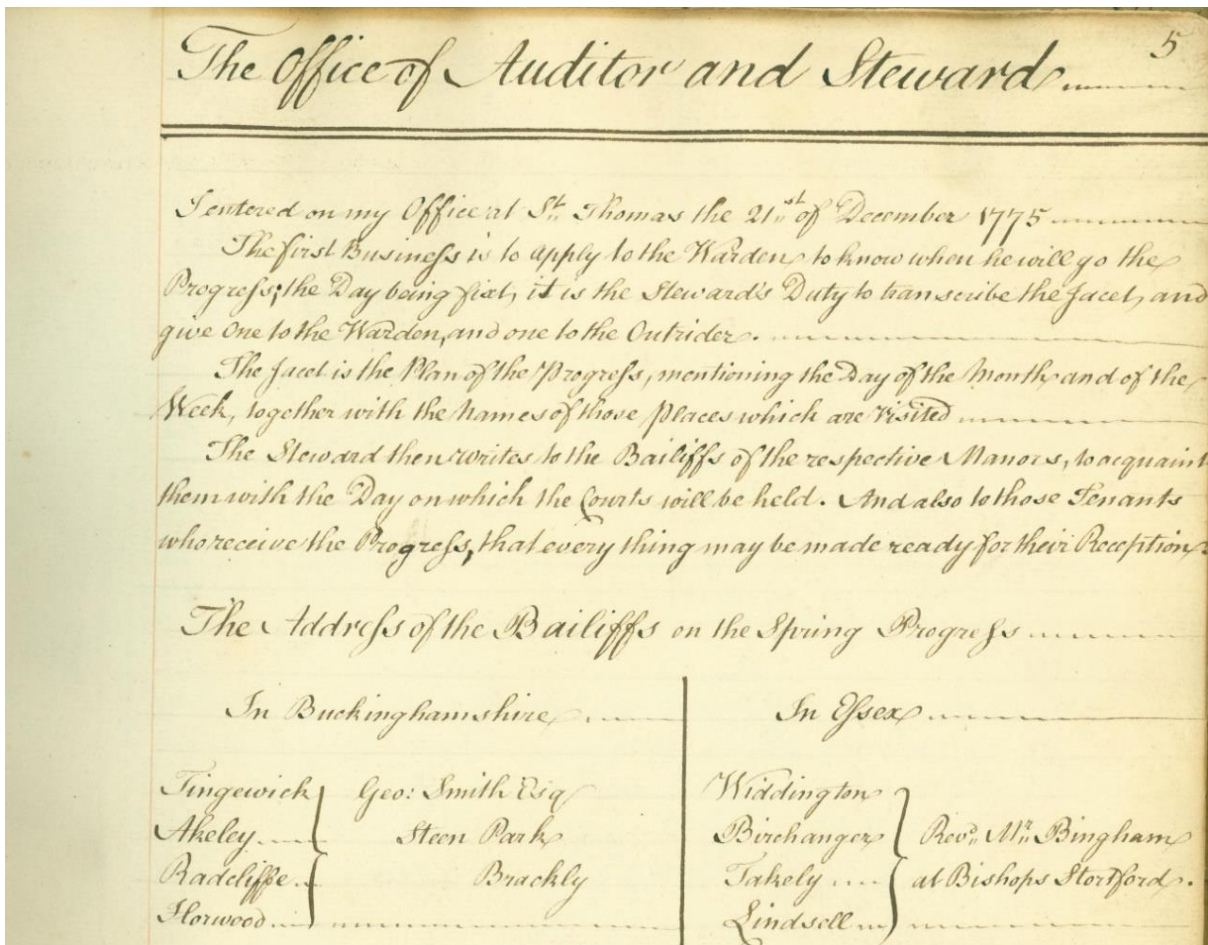


**‘Hurried out of my life . . . my horses are at the door’:
Harry Peckham and the Stewardship of New College’s Estates During the 1770s**

Depending on one’s point of view, the college Steward Harry Peckham (1740–1787) was by turns entertaining, indefatigable, opinionated and officious, but very good at his job. The son of a Sussex clergyman, he had been educated at Winchester College before coming to New College, and was a fellow (and occasionally boisterous drinking chum of Parson Woodforde) here from 1761 until his death, aged only 46, in 1787. During that time he was called to the Bar, became a member of the Middle Temple, one of the King’s Commissioners for Bankrupts, and Recorder of Chichester, as well as advising New College on its legal rights, zealously pursuing arrears of rent from its tenants, and telling one or two less than able bursars how to draw up parts of the college accounts.



NCA 9652
New College Archives, Oxford

Before coming here, Peckham set off, in the summer of 1769, on a tour of Holland, Belgium and France, which he described as an agreeable ‘blunder through the country’. He noted in some detail his impressions of the places he visited, from a bridewell in Delft (with its prostitutes confined for up to ten or even twenty years ‘for their *philanthropy*’), to the Paris theatres (you are never interrupted with riots or disturbances as in England, for sentinels with their bayonets fixed stand in different parts of the theatre’), to the palace of Versailles and the barracks at Calais, in a series of anonymous and colourful ‘letters home’ which have been edited

by Martin Brayne. A copy of *Harry Peckham's Tour* is held in the College Library and is well worth reading.¹

Peckham was appointed our Auditor and Steward in 1775, and immediately started a formal register² of the college properties, their values, rents and fines paid on the renewal of leases from some five or six years earlier, together with a list of college livings and their values. The careful and precise nature of the man is clear in his opening paragraph on folio 5: 'I entered on my office at St Thomas [the Apostle], the 21st of December 1775', followed by what he regarded as his most urgent duty, to sort out the arrangements for the Warden's Spring Progress to Buckinghamshire and Essex.

On folios 7-8 he noted the mileages from Oxford to various New College manors, and the routes and distances from London (since he did much of his stewardship work from his London Chambers near Temple Bar, and was always mindful of the cost of travel), together with the names of the bailiffs and key tenants to be seen during the Progress. He continued (on folio 9) to note the duties of the Steward, with particular regard to keeping tenancy records for the college.

One of the most interesting sections of the volume is the instant snapshot it provides of the City of Oxford properties leased out by New College by 1770 (folios 51-60). Along with lesser tenements they included The Cross Inn, the adjacent Crown Tavern 'now a mercer's' in the Corn Market, the former bakehouse in Butcher Row and Lamb's tenement in the High Street opposite Carfax, all in St Martin's parish; the Oxenford Inn alias The Bluebell, and Ball's Coffee House in the Canditch (by Peckham's day demolished, he notes, to make way for part of the Printing House [now the Sheldonian theatre]), all in St Mary Magdalen's parish; the Blue Boar in St Aldate's parish; Stodleys Inn [now the remains of the Westminster Bank 120-122 High Street] in All Saints parish; Staple Hall [now some of the houses along New College Lane] in St Peter's in the East parish; the Three Tuns between Carfax and New Inn Hall Lane, and 'a tenement in 7 Deadly Sins Lane next but one to St Peter's Church, now a Boarding School', all in the parish of St Peter's in the Bailey. They tie in neatly with earlier and later documents still held for research purposes in the college archives even though we parted with most of the properties in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.

By the winter of 1775/6 the indefatigable Peckham was setting to rights the lax rent valuations set by the somewhat indolent solicitor William Murgatroyd for the college's house and its stables in the Military Mews, St Anne's Soho. The leases of these had been consistently undervalued for several decades and Warden Oglander was keen to impose more realistic agreements.

Peckham moved cautiously at first, anxious not to upset the tenants (who included the Revd Dr Green, Dean of Salisbury) until he could acquire information 'from a better authority than Mr Murgatroyd' and also reluctant to engage—just yet—with the tenants until they had accepted Warden Oglander's much steeper terms for their leases. Once they did agree, however, he sent a jubilant letter to Warden Oglander, together with a supply of Oglander's favourite snuff.³ Peckham was himself a keen snuff-taker, acquiring a number of ornate French and English snuff boxes which he bequeathed to friends and members of his family when he died.

Within a year of upstaging Mr Murgatroyd, however, Peckham was indeed too busy for comfort. A group of letters⁴ on college business between Warden Gauntlett, several bursars and

¹ *Harry Peckham's Tour*, ed. Martin Brayne (Cirencester, 2008), New College Library, Oxford, OX1/BRA.

² NCA 9652, New College Archives, Oxford.

³ NCA 329/14-16.

⁴ NCA 3223.

various rectors of college livings reveal that he had taken on not only the question of arrears of payments due to the college from several of its church livings but had also found it necessary to take to task those bursars whose 'Long Books' of financial accounts left much to be desired, and still provoke occasional exasperation in those who look at them today. At that date, college still adhered to the Founder's statute requiring three fellows to act as bursars each year and maintain the accounts, a trio which the sardonic lessee of Writtle woodlands in 1779 referred to as 'the Trinity'.

Despite the half-humorous approach reflected in his letters, Peckham was clearly running short on patience with those fellows who believed that bills due to college were not something to be settled quickly, if at all. His correspondence suggests that they consisted predominantly of fellows who claimed to be Founder's Kin (that is, descended directly or through marriage from a member of William of Wykeham's family), or who were appointed to college livings.

The Revd Robert Speed, a New College fellow and vicar of Romford Chapel, was a particular bugbear: in November 1777 he complained that he had not received any livery payments from college for the past three years and had simply received an 'extraordinary letter' from Peckham on the subject. It was a red rag to a bull, and Speed's plaintive letter is endorsed with the draft of Peckham's high-handed response: 'Had you paid your rents at College in due time, as you ought to have done, you would have saved me the trouble of an extraordinary letter'. Speed paid up his rent arrears.

Two years later Peckham had robust advice for bursar Benjamin Jeffries, who had landed himself in a battle with an aristocratic tenant in Northamptonshire over tithe rent arrears. Jeffries had received a pompous letter from the tenant's own land steward in October 1779, requesting that, since his lordship was 'ever ready to discharge the usual just demands of the Trust of New College on him', he would appreciate a detailed account of the arrears, 'that the same may be settled and paid'. To which Jeffries pointed out that in fact his lordship was no longer a tenant, having been given notice to quit over a year ago, given his massive arrears of tithe rents, but that since he was still using the tithe barn for his own purposes a lawsuit against him had been filed.⁵ At this crucial moment Peckham was ill, but as soon as he recovered in November he wrote gleefully to Jeffries that he was 'both ready and willing to drag some of your Jacobite friends to the scaffold',⁶ Peckham himself being a staunch Whig.

At around this time the college was preoccupied with the installation, by Thomas Jervais, of Sir Joshua Reynolds's great west window in the Antechapel, and inevitably Peckham became involved. He seems to have upset Reynolds quite early in the negotiations, for on 10 November 1777 Sir Joshua wrote to a Mr Potter asking him 'to tell the gentleman [Peckham, on behalf of the college] that was with you today at my house that tho I cannot part with the Picture, I intend they shall have a Cartoon properly finished with which they may do as they please'.⁷ Neither man forgot the incident, and three years later Reynolds signed a receipt for £147 received from Peckham for the cartoon,⁸ thereby clearing the way for Peckham to draw up an agreement with Thomas Jervais to complete, before Christmas 1784, the painting of the glass in the west window according to Reynolds's designs.

⁵ NCA 3223/21, New College Archives, Oxford.

⁶ NCA 3223/22.

⁷ NCA 1192/5.

⁸ NCA 1192/9.

Received June 16th 1780 from
Harry Peckham Esq. the sum
of one hundred and forty seven
pounds for designs for the
Window of New College Oxford

147

John Reynolds

NCA 1192/9
New College Archives, Oxford

All in all, New College had good reason to be grateful to Harry Peckham for bringing the college's estates and finances to a better state than he had found them in 1775. Of his private life the college archives are silent, but when he died his will named as a beneficiary his daughter Sarah Peckham, 'born the third of May seventeen hundred and seventy one', ten years after Peckham had become a fellow of this college and sworn obedience to the Founder's statutes that, *inter alia*, forbade fellows to marry. Perhaps that was one reason why no mention of New College appears in his will.⁹ It seems that he died as he had lived, a taker of calculated risks, for Martin Brayne notes that Peckham broke his neck in a hunting accident yet insisted on being carried back to London, where he died in his Temple chambers. According to Musgrave's *Obituaries Prior to 1800*, he died on 10 January 1787; he was buried in Temple Church nine days later, and within a few weeks the London printer G. Kearley issued a new expanded edition of *A Tour through Holland, Dutch Brabant, the Austrian Netherlands, and part of France*, now for the first time naming 'the late Harry Peckham Esq.' as the author.

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⁹ TNA (The National Archives): PROB 11/1152/84.