

The Education of an Elizabethan Gentleman: Sir Alexander Temple at Oxford



Sir Alexander Temple's portrait was painted in 1620 by Cornelius Johnson who painted more than a dozen portraits of members of the Temple family. The version shown here is displayed in Hagley Hall in Worcestershire. It is reproduced by kind permission of Viscount Cobham.

Sir Alexander Temple was a reasonably prominent member of the landed gentry during the reigns of James I and Charles I.¹ He was born into the upwardly mobile Temple family of Stowe, in Buckinghamshire, in 1583. However, he had three elder brothers, so he was not destined to inherit the family estates. Nonetheless, during his lifetime he held numerous public offices. These included being Senior Warden of Rochester Bridge,² a Justice of the Peace for both Essex³ and Sussex;⁴ the

¹ I would like to express my gratitude to Sarah Wheale of the Bodleian Library for her help in locating the shelf reference for the book donated by Sir Alexander and to Dr Christopher Skelton-Foord, Librarian at New College, Oxford, for assistance in the search for the book and for providing me with the details of the book and also with photographs of the binding and the bookplate. An abbreviated version of this note will be posted in the blog of the Thurrock Local History Society.

² Nigel Yates and James M. Gibson (eds.), *Traffic and Politics: The Construction and Management of Rochester Bridge, AD 43-1993* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1994).

³ Alison Wall, 'The Great Purge of 1625: "The Late Murraine amongst the Gentlemen of the Peace"', *Historical Research* 82 (218) (2009), pp. 677-693.

⁴ J. S. Cockburn (ed.), *Calendar of Assize Records: Sussex Indictments: James I* (London: HMSO, 1975).

Captain of Tilbury Fort⁵ and a Member of Parliament for Sussex.⁶ He was one of around fifty people knighted by James I at Tower Hill in March 1603/4.⁷

Sir Alexander initially lived in St Margaret's, Rochester, the home of his first wife. Following her death, in 1607 he moved to Chadwell St Mary in Essex. He lived in Chadwell for many years and despite leaving Essex for Sussex when he married his third wife, he continued to own property there until he died in 1629. Sir Alexander was the father of the regicide, James Temple, the grandfather of the naturalist, Martin Lister and great-grandfather of Sarah, the celebrated Duchess of Marlborough. Through the Duchess of Marlborough he is a direct ancestor of Prince William, Duke of Cambridge.

Sir Alexander was a literate man, although only a relatively small number of his letters have survived and these are scattered across a number of different archives both in the UK and overseas. He wrote letters about his relationship with other members of his family, there were letters concerned with the conduct of his business affairs, and he wrote to the Duke of Buckingham protesting about the failure to pay the gunners at Tilbury Fort their wages. No doubt he corresponded on many other subjects as well since he is referred to in letters written by other people written either to him or about him. In particular, the conduct of the 1624 Parliamentary election at Winchelsea in his second (failed) bid to enter Parliament caused him to protest and to challenge the result. These actions were discussed in contemporary correspondence. When he was finally elected to Parliament in 1626, he was sufficiently eloquent that his Parliamentary speeches were noted by his contemporaries.⁸

His childhood was spent at the family home, Stowe House and he may have attended the Royal Latin School in Buckingham as did some other members of his family. His education was certainly augmented by a period of attendance at Lincoln's Inn⁹ with which he maintained a lifelong connection. However, unlike his eldest brother, Sir Thomas Temple, who is recorded as matriculating at University College, Oxford in June 1582, Sir Alexander is not listed among those attending either of England's universities. His name is not among those recorded by either Foster¹⁰ or Venn.¹¹ However, at the time, it was common for sons of gentlemen to spend some time at one of the universities as well as one of the Inns of Court, so it would not be surprising if Sir Alexander did indeed attend a university, albeit briefly.

Some evidence for a period at Oxford can be derived from a bookplate recording a gift made by Sir Alexander to the Library of New College, Oxford. The book plate reads 'Alexander Tempellus dono dedit' (given by Alexander Temple), although the wording on the plate is partially obscured by a later library plate. The plate is printed and the words were presumably chosen by Sir Alexander himself, although it is possible it was the work of the New College librarian. The book in question¹² is Camden's *Britannia*—full title: *Britannia sine Florentissimorum regnorum, Angliæ, Scotiæ, Hiberniæ, et insularum adiacentium ex intima antiquitate chorographica descriptio*. There are a large number of editions of this book, but the edition donated by Sir Alexander was published in 1600. This presumably indicates that his stay at Oxford came to an end shortly after this date.

⁵ John Bruce (ed.), *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, of the Reign of Charles I: 1627-1628* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, & Roberts, 1858).

⁶ Andrew Thrush and John P. Ferris (eds.), *The House of Commons 1604-1629* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁷ William A. Shaw, *The Knights of England: A Complete Record from the Earliest Time to the Present Day of the Knights of All the Orders of Chivalry in England, Scotland and Ireland, and of Knights Bachelors* (London: Sherratt & Hughes, 1906).

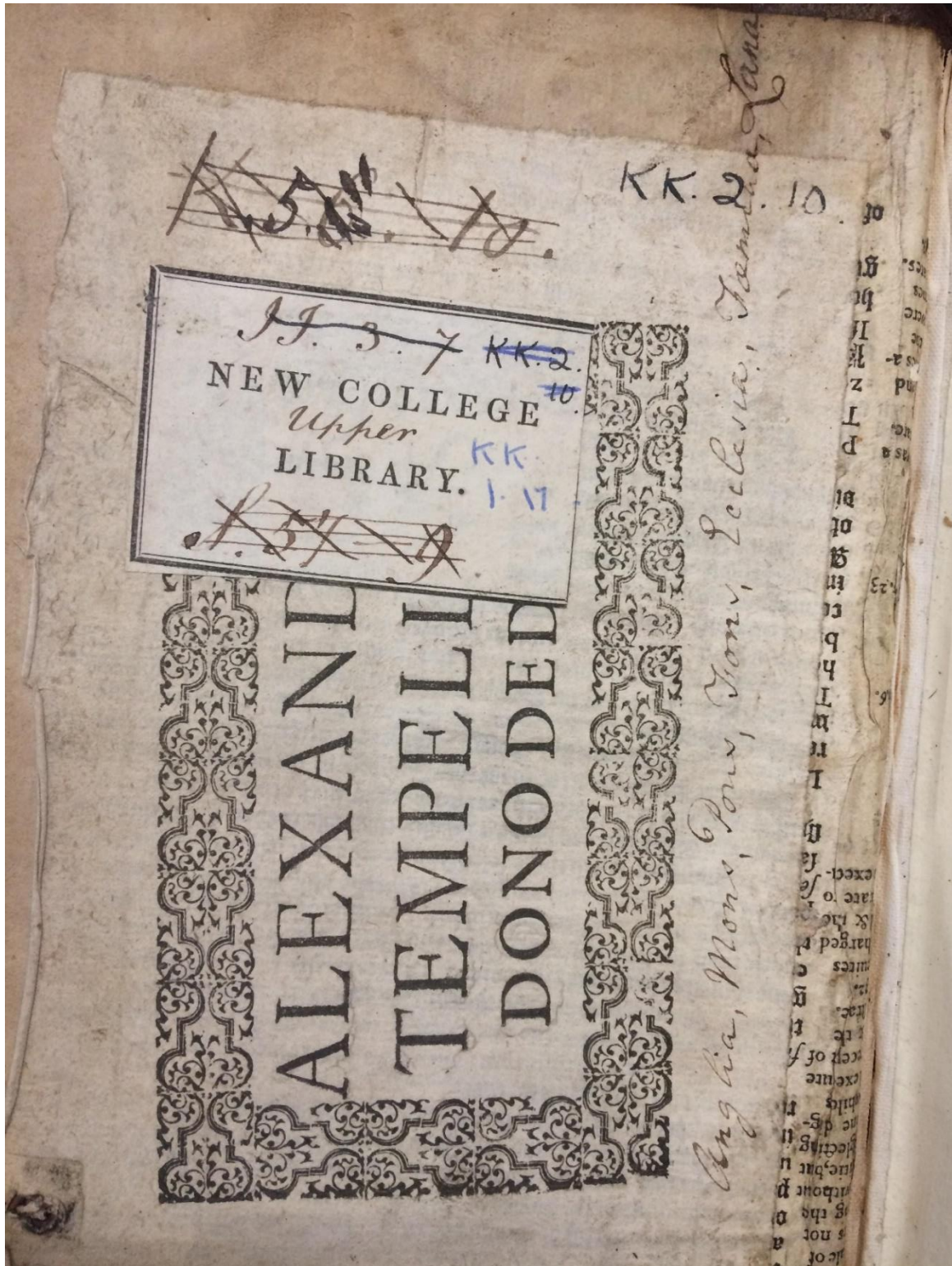
⁸ William B. Bidwell and Maija Jansson (eds.), *Proceedings in Parliament, 1626: House of Commons* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

⁹ W. Paley Baildon (ed.), *The Records of the Honorable Society of Lincoln's Inn: Admissions from A.D. 1420 to A.D. 1799* (London: Lincoln's Inn, 1896).

¹⁰ Joseph Foster, *Alumni Oxoniensis: The Members of the University of Oxford, 1500-1714* (Oxford: James Parker & Co., 1891-1892).

¹¹ John Venn and J. A. Venn, *Alumni Cantabrigienses: A Biographical List of All Known Students, Graduates and Holders of Office at the University of Cambridge, from the Earliest Times to 1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922-1954).

¹² New College Library, Oxford, BT3.193.6.



Bookplate in William Camden, *Britannia* (1600)
New College Library, Oxford, BT3.193.6

At the time of the donation, books were sold as loose leaves that could be cut and bound in a style that suited the owner.¹³ Sir Alexander apparently paid for his donation to be bound in calf hide and the record of the donation was stamped in the binding of the book as well as being

¹³ Owen Gingerich, *The Book Nobody Read: Chasing the Revolutions of Nicholas Copernicus* (London: Heinemann, 2004).

recorded in the bookplate. The binding is described in the library catalogue as ‘16th century calf with blind rolls in panel design, with blind cording darts, and “dono dedit” blind stamped in centre; evidence of ties; printed waste used as paste downs; evidence of chaining towards tail of upper board foreedge; rebacked’.



New College Library, Oxford, BT3.193.6, binding

The binding gives his name as Alex Temple—a common abbreviation, although he usually signed his first name in full.



New College Library, Oxford, BT3.193.6, binding

In the early modern period, the donation of books was not uncommon as a reward for services. For example, later in his life, Sir Alexander donated a book to the library at Canterbury Cathedral, as a mark of gratitude for a visit to his home by the auditor to settle the details of a lease to his daughter of land owned by the Dean and Chapter.

The donation to the library at New College was no doubt made in the same spirit: a token of his gratitude for a period spent being educated at Oxford. The records that name Oxford University students of the period are incomplete and there are known to be omissions. Despite the fact that Foster does not record him as matriculating or graduating from Oxford, it appears safe to conclude that Sir Alexander did receive some education at Oxford during his formative years, although he probably did not graduate.

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