

**Christopher Saxton's 1579 *Atlas of England and Wales*:  
An Unexpected Savilian Book Among New College Library's Treasures**

*A contribution to our celebration of the 400th Anniversary of the  
Savilian Professorships in Geometry and Astronomy*

Over the course of this year, much work has been going on in New College Library to mark the 400th anniversary of the Savilian Professorships in Geometry and Astronomy. These celebrations have included library exhibitions and a recently published book (the first in our new imprint) detailing the history of the professorships and the library collections associated with them. In preparation for these, I have been researching the life and work of the professorships' founder Sir Henry Savile, an Elizabethan scholar and courtier with a dizzying range of accomplishments. As I read about his early life in Yorkshire, I recalled a New College book I had seen several months earlier which also had connections to Elizabethan Yorkshire. This book is one of the Library's finest early printed volumes: Christopher Saxton's 1579 *Atlas of the Counties of England and Wales*. A nineteenth-century owner of the book had noted on a flyleaf that the atlas's original owners were from Yorkshire. Could it be, I wondered, that the original owners were the Savile family—a wealthy, academically inclined Yorkshire dynasty likely to own such a valuable and significant book? An examination of the atlas proved this idea to be correct: it was indeed owned, not by Henry Savile, but by his older brother John Savile.



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Before we investigate the Savilian connection further, let us first discuss the importance of the atlas itself. The sixteenth century has been described as a period of 'cartographic revolution'

in England.<sup>1</sup> Saxton's maps represented the culmination of this revolution. Their most significant recent predecessor had been Gerard Mercator's *Angliae, Scotiae & Hiberniae nova descriptio*. Produced in Duisburg in 1564, this colossal map of the British Isles measured approximately 3ft by 4ft. Despite his famed skill in cartography—he invented the Mercator Projection, which is still widely used in world maps—Mercator's map over-extended the southern coastline of England and presented Ireland inaccurately.<sup>2</sup> While it is associated with Mercator today, he was in fact only responsible for the latter stages of the map's production. As was usual at the time, surveying and engraving were not carried out by the same person (or people). The former process created a manuscript draft of the map, while the latter transformed the manuscript into a form ready for printing. It is thought that the surveying for Mercator's map may have been undertaken by John Rudd, vicar and cartographer. In 1561, he had received a royal dispensation to be absent from his religious duties in order to finalise a map of England 'both fairer and more perfect and truer than it hath been hitherto'.<sup>3</sup> Probably accompanying him on this surveying trip was his apprentice: Christopher Saxton.

Rudd and Saxton had similar trajectories in life: both born and raised in Yorkshire, then students at Cambridge, and then surveyors. However, the apprentice would go on to surpass his teacher. Mercator's map was not adequate in practical terms for the turbulent events towards the end of the sixteenth century, when threats of revolt and invasion loomed across Britain and Ireland. An accurate national atlas was necessary to support the complex planning of Elizabeth's politicians. By the 1570s, Rudd was nearing the end of his life, and it was Saxton who was employed to create this pioneering set of maps. Thomas Seckford, the master of the queen's requests, provided the financial support for the project and was Saxton's immediate employer. A privy council pass of March 11, 1576 records this relationship: 'A placard to Saxton, servant to Master Seckford, master of the Requests, to be assisted in all places where he shall come for the view of meet places to describe certain counties in cartes'.<sup>4</sup> However, the impetus for the atlas's creation really came from



higher still: the queen and her privy council. William Cecil, the queen's chief advisor, pulled copies of the maps off the printing press and had the uncorrected proofs bound together, so urgently did he require accurate maps.<sup>5</sup>

They proved their worth in the following years, as Elizabeth's relationship with King Philip II deteriorated and the threat of a Spanish invasion grew ever more real.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> P. D. A. Harvey, *Maps in Tudor England* (Chicago, 1993) p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> The British Library's copy of this map can be viewed in their virtual exhibition 'The Unveiling of Britain', online at <<http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/unvbrit/a/001map0000183r2u000020f0.html>>.

<sup>3</sup> Durham chapter records, register B, fol. 135.

<sup>4</sup> R. A. Skelton, *Saxton's Survey of England And Wales with a Facsimile of Saxton's Wall-Map of 1583* (Amsterdam, 1974) p. 16.

<sup>5</sup> J. B. Harley, 'The map collection of William Cecil, 1<sup>st</sup> Baron Burghley', *The Map Collector*, 3 (1978), pp. 12–19.

<sup>6</sup> Cecil's bound proofs survive at the British Library, now Royal MS 18.D.III. no. 5.



The maps were not solely objects of use, however. After the initial surveying and mapping by Saxton, a group of largely Flemish and Dutch engravers transformed his practical drafts. Off the British coasts all manner of fantastical creatures and dramatic scenes materialised: monstrous whiskered whales spout water into the air and ships go down in clouds of flames. Each map was then hand-coloured, making them unique.

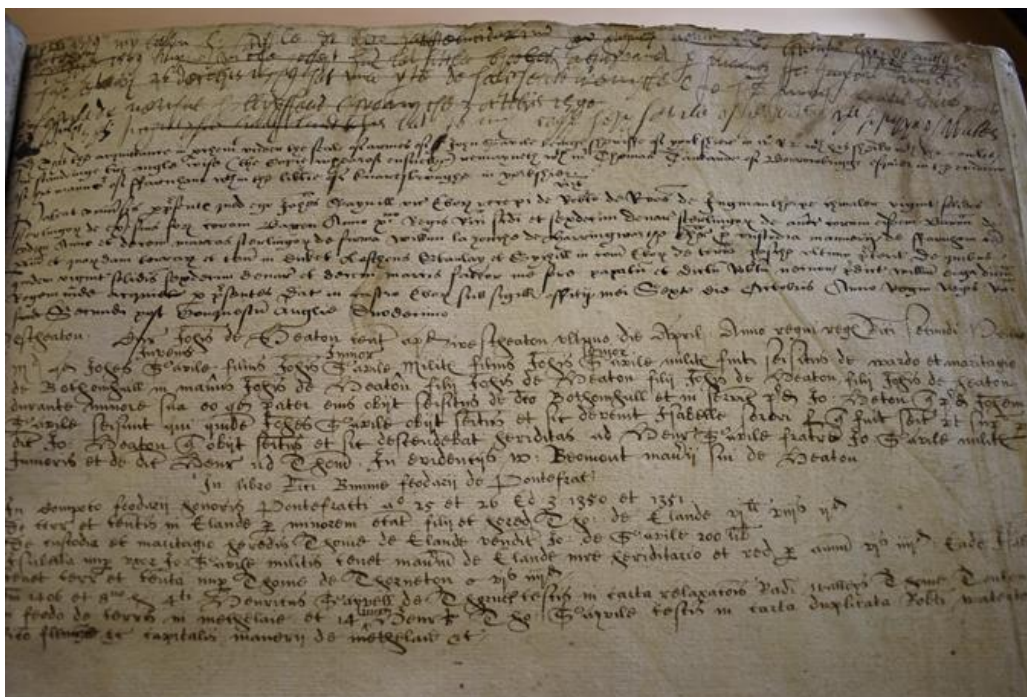
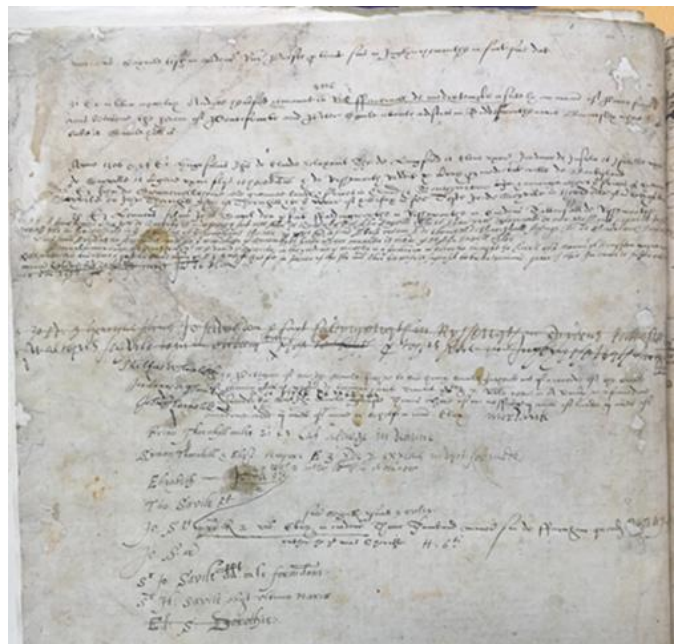
Most impressive is the atlas's frontispiece. It features a sizeable depiction of Elizabeth sitting on her throne in splendour, framed by figures representing cosmography and geography. Her dress is stretched tight across her knees, a feature that marks New College's atlas as one of the earliest to be printed. There are fewer than ten surviving copies recorded with the dress in this state: allegedly the queen found it unflattering and so it was quickly altered to a less rigid draped style.<sup>7</sup> Most surviving atlases have the frontispiece with the later depiction.

<sup>7</sup> J. Baskett, *Paul Mellon's Legacy: A Passion for British Art: Masterpieces from the Yale Center for British Art* (New Haven, 2007) pp. 298–9; cf. Skelton 1974 on identifiable features in the maps for dating.

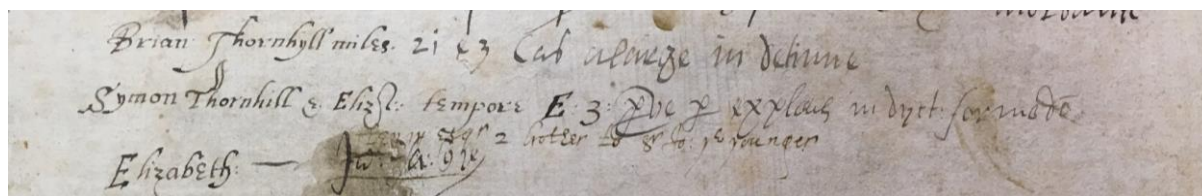


Savilian family history compiled by the Saviles themselves. Numerous hands traverse the pages, correcting and adding to each other's contributions in English and Latin. These records of lives, marriages, births and deaths, extending back centuries before the time of the writers, weave a complex tapestry of the Saviles' origins among the great dynasties of Yorkshire. In tracing their ancestral links, the sixteenth-century Saviles establish on these pages their connections to the protagonists and settings of the most storied events in the region's history, including the Battle of Boroughbridge and the Elland Feud.

Now let us return to the topic of the New College atlas's Savilian provenance. As well as the handsome gilt stamped centrepiece with his name on the atlas's binding (pictured here), John Savile's ownership of the atlas is left in no doubt by his inscription 'I.S.' and 'Io. Savile 1580' below the portrait of Elizabeth. These types of ownership marks are standard for books in this period. The more unusual marks of its Savilian owners can be found on the flyleaves at the beginning and end of the atlas. What initially appear to be pages of untidy scrawl reveal themselves, on closer inspection, to be a



The connection between the Saviles and Saxton himself is not only one of a shared Yorkshire origin. In 1558, Saxton's teacher John Rudd had been awarded the living of the vicarage at Thornhill, near Dewsbury.<sup>8</sup> A closer look at the Savile family history on their atlas finds Thornhill mentioned repeatedly. What was the connection between the Saviles and Thornhill? The manuscript genealogy on the atlas's flyleaves records the marriage of Elizabeth Thornhill, only child of Simon Thornhill, to a Henry Savile *tempore E: 3*; or during the reign of Edward III.<sup>9</sup> As the last of her family line, the Thornhill name died with Elizabeth and the family estates were taken over by the Saviles.



Members of the Savile family lived in Thornhill until the English Civil War, so Rudd would certainly have had contact with the family during his tenure as vicar. This connection was one he passed on to his apprentice. Although Saxton is famed for his 1579 atlas, he was also a prolific surveyor of private estates. While many of these estate maps have survived, they are scattered across private collections and archives in local record offices.<sup>10</sup> Lacking the visual splendour of the printed county maps, their creation by the hand of Britain's finest cartographer has often gone unrecognised. However, more recently a great many have come to light, with an identification rate of almost one per year over the twentieth century.<sup>11</sup> Among these are a number of maps commissioned by the Saviles, covering their estates in Emley, Elland, and Thornhill. The connection between the Saviles and Saxtons was an enduring one, with Christopher's son Robert later taking over the surveying of Savilian lands.

Although we now think of the Savilian Professorships as a feature of New College, their founder Henry Savile did not link them to any college.<sup>12</sup> It was only in the nineteenth century that university reforms resulted in their attachment to New College. It was also in the nineteenth century that this atlas found itself in non-Savilian hands, being purchased by the famous manuscript collector Henry Yates Thompson. He later gave it to a Wykehamist friend, after whose death it reached New College Library. It is an extraordinary piece of serendipity that the Savilian Professorships and the Savilian atlas should find a home in the same institution centuries after the time of the two sixteenth-century Savile brothers.

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<sup>8</sup> See the entry on John Rudd (c. 1498–1579) in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

<sup>9</sup> Note that this is not the same Henry Savile who founded the Oxford Professorships some 250 years later; the Saviles had the habit of naming all male children Henry, Thomas or John, which makes the genealogy somewhat confusing.

<sup>10</sup> See I. M. Evans and H. Lawrence, *Christopher Saxton, Elizabethan Map-Maker* (Wakefield, 1979).

<sup>11</sup> D. I. Bower, 'Saxton Manuscript Maps and Surveys Not Described by Evans and Lawrence', in *Imago Mundi*, 62(2) (2010), p. 200.

<sup>12</sup> See New College Library and Archives's new publication *Geometry and Astronomy in New College, Oxford* (2019) on the establishment of the Professorships.