

Lechlade Hospital of St John

Butler's Court is a considerable mid seventeenth-century gabled farm house, refronted early in the eighteenth century, with additions made in the nineteenth century which were altered after a fire in 1966.¹ It sits just to the west of Lechlade and was bought by New College from Albert Edmonds in 1876 after the death of his wife Ann nee Gearing. The estate was subsequently added to by the college in Lechlade, including especially Green Farm, in 1877, 1906, 1953, 1969, and 1970.² As with many such acquisitions, quite a number of deeds relating to previous conveyances involving especially the Gearing and Edmonds families, came into the college's archive. These take the story of these properties and their former owners back to 1581.³ However, there are also in the archive at New College, four rather earlier documents relating to Lechlade. Their provenance is unrecorded, but they could have been part of this material that the college would have acquired on the acquisition of these properties albeit they do not actually seem to relate to these properties. They have a considerable importance in their own right being a further indication of how significant the college's archive is, not just for what it can tell us about the college's highly impactful development, but also for the varied and noteworthy stories that many of its estate acquisitions brought into the archive.

The story marked by these documents is that they are four papal bulls from the second quarter of the thirteenth century.⁴ Quite a quantity of such significant documents exists in the archive as the founder, William of Wykeham, was keen to gain papal sanction and approval for many of his early actions in setting up and endowing the college.⁵ These four predate those from the founder's time by a century and a half, but their provenance in the college's archive is by no means clear. They concern the hospital or priory of St John the Baptist in Lechlade. As with many such medieval hospitals, very little original documentation of the hospital itself survives. Material for it features neither in the database of hospital records held by The National Archives nor in the database of English monastic archives held by University College London.⁶ The history of the hospital published in 1907 has the hospital as being only 'founded in or before 1246'.⁷ This start date was subsequently pushed back to 'before 1228' on the basis of a mention of the hospital as being then built by Peter FitzHerbert.⁸ This earlier date is confirmed by these four papal bulls which all concern the hospital, with the earliest of the bulls being 1233, and the three others dating from 1247. The hospital of St John the Baptist had been established near the crossing of the Thames on the north side at Lechlade, presumably to care for sick and poor travellers using the road, by Isabel de Mortimer and her second husband Peter FitzHerbert. Isabel had held the manor of Lechlade since 1204, and had married Peter FitzHerbert after the death of her first husband Roger de Mortimer in 1214. Thereby the hospital, of the Augustinian order, is likely to have been founded sometime between 1214 and 1228.

Isabel (died 1252) and Peter (died 1235) clearly made considerable efforts to secure support for their nascent foundation. The first of these four New College documents is a 1233 bull from Pope Gregory IX, giving his protection to the hospital, and also to its possessions etc granted by

¹ *The Victoria History of the County of Gloucester*, vol. VII, ed. N. M. Herbert (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 113.

² New College still has a considerable interest in and around Lechlade but not in Butler's Court which was sold in c. 2010; I am grateful to Charles Champion for a discussion on this.

³ New College Archives, Oxford, NCA 268–269, 4620, 4630–4633, 5719–5726, 5731–5734, 10000.

⁴ The bulls were technically the round generally lead seals attached to the foot of such documents but the term has come to be applied to the whole document.

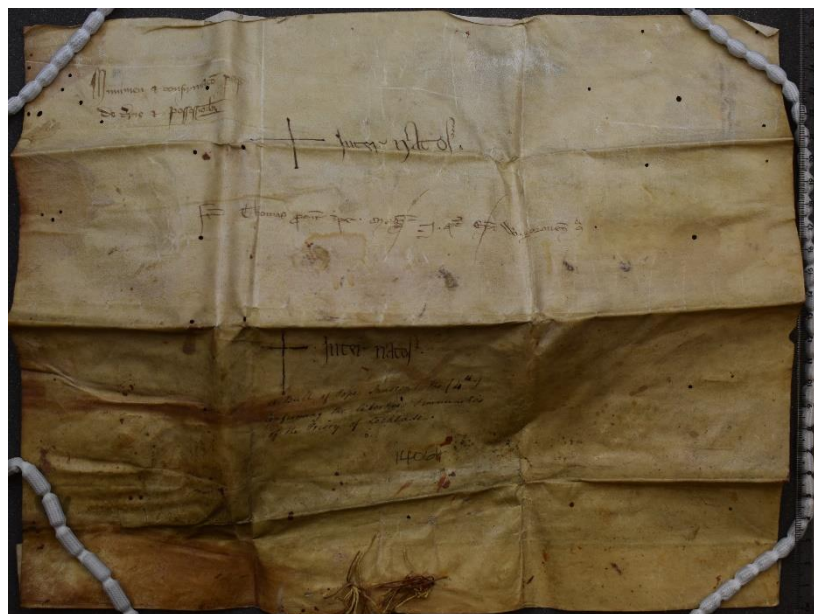
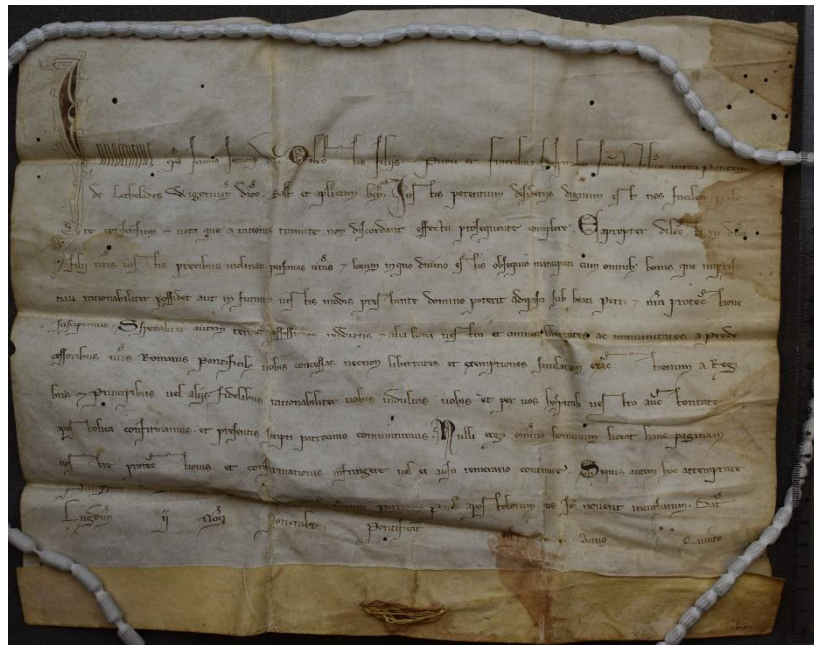
⁵ Thirteen such papal bulls are listed in Hastings Rashdall and Robert S. Rait, *New College*, University of Oxford College Histories (London: F. E. Robinson, 1901), p. 30–32, and also Francis W. Steer, *The Archives of New College, Oxford: A Catalogue* (London: Phillimore, 1974), pp. 82–5.

⁶ The National Archives Hospital Records Database: <www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/hospitalrecords/>; English Monastic Archives Database: <www.ucl.ac.uk/history/research/english-monastic-archives-database>.

⁷ *The Victoria History of the County of Gloucester*, vol. II, ed. William Page (London: Constable, 1907), pp. 125–6.

⁸ *Calendar of Close Rolls, Henry III: 1227–1231* (London: HMSO, 1902), p. 82; *Victoria History . . . Gloucester*, VII, p. 106.

the bishop of Worcester (William de Blois) and H. (?Hugh of Wells) archdeacon of Bath as its patrons.⁹ This was also backed up by a further confirmation in 1246 by the king, Henry III, of grants to the hospital by Isabel and Roaesia de Estcot.¹⁰ In November 1247, three further bulls were secured from Pope Innocent IV (one of these is illustrated below), reiterating Gregory's protection, and also confirming Isabella de Mortimer's grant to the hospital of land called 'Lade', along with an indult conceding that the hospital should not be compelled to receive or provide for anyone with a pension or a benefice.¹¹



Pope Innocent IV 1247 bull for Lechlade Hospital, front and back
New College Archives, Oxford, NCA 14064 © Courtesy of the Warden and Scholars of New College, Oxford

⁹ NCA 14063.

¹⁰ *Calendar of the Charter Rolls, Henry III: 1226–1257*, (London: HMSO, 1903), p. 296.

¹¹ NCA 13907, 14064, 14065. All the bulls are calendared in Jane E. Sayers, *Original Papal Documents in England and Wales from the Accession of Pope Innocent III to the Death of Pope Benedict XI (1198–1304)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 85 and 149–50.

The bulls are part of quite an impressive quantity of such documents held in New College's archive—only five other institutions in the country have more bulls surviving from the long thirteenth century of Jane Sayers's survey of such documents.¹² However the acquisition of these four by New College is by no means clear.¹³ One of them (NCA 13907) is actually with the considerable group of material for Writtle hospital in Essex which was acquired by New College in 1391. The Lechlade bull is transcribed along with all the other Writtle material in the great seventeenth-century copy register of evidences by William Ball, which one might call a cartulary.¹⁴ The other three Lechlade bulls do not appear in there, nor are they endorsed with deed numbers as have pretty well all other such early material. It may well be that they were not noticed and missed out on such registering. It would seem that the four bulls would have been a small corpus of material which at some stage has been split up. The college's later interest in Butler's Court *et al.* may just be a coincidence as there is no mention of 'curious old writings' or the like being offered in the sale particulars when the college bought it in 1876 for £14,800.¹⁵

Whatever the provenance of these bulls, they do bring the college's archive into contact with the great administrative machinery that was the medieval papal chancery. They stand in considerable contrast to many of the title deeds that the archive holds for such as Steppingley in Bedfordshire,¹⁶ which have no contemporary endorsements and only some later identification numbers, probably added by Warden Culpeper in the 1580s,¹⁷ for any sort of additional text. These bulls have quite a range of additional marks, words and phrases which help to embellish the information of the main text that they convey, not only by what they say but even by where they are positioned on the document.¹⁸

None of the bulls have their original lead *bullae* or seals remaining which would have confirmed the pope's name and number, but they do all have shreds surviving of the silk threads (red and yellow) by which the *bullae* would have been attached. Such threads are in themselves an indicator of the status of the documents as privileges and letters of grace, rather than letters of justice, whose *bullae* would have been attached with hemp cords. Other features signifying such a status for these documents are the majuscule form of the pope's name and the use of ligatures between the letters 'c' and 't' and 's' and 't' creating seemingly gaps in the middle of words. Nigh on impossible to show on an image of the document (maybe just visible in the extreme bottom right corner of the front of the document on its turnup or *plica*) are the initials of the scribe, in this case 'b.m.' for Bartolomeus de Montefortino, so from central Italy, not too far from Rome. Even less visible in the top right corner is 'Jac.' or 'Joh.' possibly cancelled by double oblique strokes. This is probably someone assigned a task to carry out related to the document (the significance of names in this location is still not clear) such as checking and/or correcting it, with the strokes indicating that this has been done. Then on the dorse are various statements including a central one about two proctors: one, Brother Thomas, acting for the hospital who *impetravit* or supplicated for the bull, and the other, Master J. acting for the bishop of Worcester, who *contradixit*, indicating that these documents are probably the product of a lawsuit before the papal court *audientia litterarum contradictarum*.¹⁹ This is a further indication of the support that the hospital would have needed to

¹² *ibid.*, p. xxix.

¹³ New College is not alone in this; the provenance of Lambeth Palace Library's even greater collection of bulls is also not always clear: Jane E. Sayers, *Original Papal Documents in the Lambeth Palace Library: A Catalogue* (London: Athlone Press, 1967), pp. 2–4.

¹⁴ NCA 9790, p. 414.

¹⁵ NCA 5734 and 268.

¹⁶ NCA 9673–9676, 9678, 9679.

¹⁷ Jennifer Thorp, 'Archive', in *New College*, ed. Christopher Tyerman (London: Third Millennium, 2010), p. 99.

¹⁸ See the chart and associated discussion in Thomas Frenz, *I documenti pontifici nel Medioevo e nell'età moderna*, 2nd ed. (Vatican: Scuola Vaticana di Paleografia, Diplomatica e Archivistica, 1998), pp. 86–9.

¹⁹ See Peter Herde, *Audientia Litterarum Contradictarum: Untersuchungen über die päpstlichen Justizbriefe und die päpstliche Delegationsgerichtsbarkeit vom 13. bis zum Beginn des 16. Jahrhunderts*, vol. 1 (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1970) for the court overall, and for the roles of such proctors: Jane Sayers, 'Canterbury Proctors at the Court of "Audientia Litterarum Contradictarum"', *Traditio* 22 (1966), 311–45.

secure such a bull, and also indicates something of the role that the patron of the hospital, the bishop of Worcester, would have fulfilled. All of this so far is almost certainly the work of the papal chancery. What is more ambivalent is a further feature that appears on the dorse of these three Innocent IV bulls but apparently on no others from his time, and that is a cross followed by the words *Inter natos*. This feature appears twice on two of the bulls and just once on the other, but each time in the same place. The location of the phrase is thus consistent, and so is the form of the crosses which, where there are two of them, are distinctive: the lower one has a longer vertical arm whereas the upper one has two equal arms. As with much else about these documents, the significance of these phrases is not clear. A translation of ‘amongst or between the born or births’ does not seem to make sense, unless we might have here the mark of a proctor or notary and then a motto perhaps of theirs. It might also be an indication of where the documents were stored in the hospital as the variant discolouration on the dorse indicates that the documents may have spent much of their life just folded in two, but perhaps just the two of them were turned round and so the phrase was repeated. Where we might more confidently see the hand of a brother of the hospital at Lechlade is in the possibly near contemporary descriptions of the document, in relation to the hospital, that feature in the top or bottom left of the dorse of the document, two of which describe the particular document as a *munimen*. Lechlade is not mentioned but that these are papal documents is.²⁰ Then there are various later descriptions of the documents which detail the documents from the point of view of the New College archive.

Such are some of the inferences that might be drawn from these papal bulls. They raise almost as many questions as they answer, which is part of their intrigue and is also symptomatic of much of the college’s archive in its potential for research exploration. The hospital itself was dissolved in 1472, with some of its buildings being pulled down in *c.* 1520 to help repair the bridge in Lechlade. Its site is now (2022) largely filled by a caravan park, but its legacy very much lives on in this small part of New College’s archive.

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²⁰ Much of this draws on Sayers, *Original Papal Documents* (1999), pp. lii–cxv, and also the advice of Professor Barbara Bombi of the University of Kent for which I am most grateful.