

The Acquisition of Alton Barnes as a New College Estate in 1385

The manors of Alton Barnes with Shaw and Alton Priors, now the civil parish of Alton, are in the Vale of Pewsey on the Marlborough Downs in Wiltshire.¹ They include the highest point in the county, a chalk-cut white horse of 1812 paid for by a college tenant Robert Pile, reputedly Britain's oldest road in the Ridgeway, and the Wansdyke now believed to be a mid-Saxon boundary between Wessex and Mercia.² There is also the Kennet and Avon Canal, which arrived in 1807, and a modest church in Alton Barnes of Anglo-Saxon origins.³ Alton Priors only came into New College's purview relatively recently, in 1912. Alton Barnes with Shaw, on the other hand, has had a much longer association with the college, being one of the first estates to be provided by the Founder for his new foundation in Oxford when it became part of the college's endowment in 1385. As with many of the college's estates, the New College archive is rich with documents recording both the process of it becoming part of that endowment, and also something of the back story of its existence before then. So, although the bare details of Alton Barnes with Shaw becoming part of the patrimony of New College in 1385 have been well outlined in the appropriate Victoria County History volume by D. A. Crowley,⁴ it might be instructive to consider that process in a little more detail, to see perhaps how the Founder developed the estates portfolio that was to become that patrimony. It might also be beneficial to look at the documents that record that process and that illustrate the care taken by the Founder to build up and ensure that patrimony. Wykeham was an astute and innovative developer and manager of his estate who recognised the need to provide for his new foundations with an adequate endowment, safeguarded with appropriate documentation from all possible interested parties.⁵

In the mid-14th century, the lord of the manor of Alton Barnes was William Montagu (1328–1397), 2nd earl of Salisbury. He was one of Edward III's great captains in the first part of the Hundred Years War. Succeeding his father as earl in 1344 on the first earl's death after a tournament, William was knighted on the Crécy campaign in 1346. He was then prominent at the Battle of Poitiers in 1356, commanding the Black Prince's rearguard to great effect. A founder member of the Order of the Garter in 1348, he was married for a time to its possible inspiration and the king's cousin, the renowned Joan Fair Maid of Kent, before Thomas Holland successfully disputed the liaison.⁶

Meantime, the tenant of Alton Barnes by 1363 after the death of Elizabeth widow of John Thistledon, was Walter of Frampton, who had acquired it through his wife Margaret, daughter and heir of Geoffrey Blount, under the terms of a 1328 settlement. Walter's interest was seemingly under some pressure as in 1363 he successfully resisted the claims of various including a Thistledon heir.⁷ Also, in 1366 Walter had his interest confirmed by John Kengrove who recognised that the

¹ This Alton is not to be confused with Alton in Hampshire where the manors of Willhall and Wyards were purchased for Wykeham's other great educational foundation of Winchester College in 1474 and 1483 respectively: Sheila Himsworth, *Winchester College Muniments: A Descriptive List: Vol. II Estates (Part 1)* (Chichester: Phillimore, 1984), p. 27.

² I am grateful to David Carson of Alton Barnes for such local details.

³ On the church see such as Alison Arnold, Robert Howard, and Cathy Tyers, *Church of St Mary, Alton Barnes, Wiltshire: Tree-Ring Analysis of Oak Timbers* (Historic England Research Report Series 31–2016) <https://historicengland.org.uk/research/results/reports/6600/ChurchofStMaryAltonBarnesWiltshire_Tree-ringAnalysisofTimbers> (Accessed: 12 December 2023).

⁴ D. A. Crowley, 'Alton Barnes', in *The Victoria History of Wiltshire: Vol. X*, ed Elizabeth Crittall (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 8–13.

⁵ Virginia Davis, *William Wykeham* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2007), p. 149; T. A. R. Evans and R. J. Faith, 'College Estates and University Finances 1350–1500', in *The History of the University of Oxford: Vol. II: Late Medieval Oxford*, ed J. I. Catto and Ralph Evans (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), pp. 635–708.

⁶ The marriage machinations are discussed in M. M. N. Stansfield, 'The Holland family, Dukes of Exeter, Earls of Kent and Huntingdon, 1352–1475' (unpublished DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 1987), pp. 20–30.

⁷ Crowley, 'Alton Barnes', pp. 9–10; the tenant in the late 12th century was probably Henry de Berners and throughout the documents considered in this piece the manor is titled *Aulton Berners*.

manor was quit of any interest or claim from himself.⁸ The origin of Kengrove's interest is unclear but the quitclaim's witness list is headed by the mayor of Coventry and the city's two bailiffs which might perhaps indicate a business interest, maybe to do with a mortgage. This might also suggest why Frampton was seemingly amenable to an approach from William de Wykeham, who may have been looking to acquire such an estate on possibly advantageous terms. Whatever the background, Wykeham acquired the manor from Frampton and his wife Margaret in 1367. The transaction was completed in 1370 with the grant of the manor and its advowson on 5 May in a document bearing the seals of Walter and his wife.⁹ On the same day, they appointed Walter Skillyng and John Edward, who was the vicar of the neighbouring Charlton, as their attorneys to deliver seisin or possession of the properties to Wykeham.¹⁰ Just over a month later, on 8 June, something of the rationale and background to this transaction become clear as this indenture acknowledges that Frampton and his wife had given Alton Barnes and the advowson to Wykeham, who had given them his manor of Mourton in Dorset, with its advowson, and various other lands and tenements in *Pudele Turbervill*. There were also arrangements about their respective takeover of the estates outlined, regarding such as Wykeham letting the Framptons store their corn in the granges at Alton Barnes until the following Easter. The document was sealed at New Salisbury with the seal tag being recycled from curiously a document concerning the sheriff of Lincoln.¹¹ Then eight days later, on 16 June, the Framptons affirm Wykeham's title by quitclaiming the interest of themselves, along with the interest of Margaret's heirs as it was through his wife that Walter had his title. There is also now an indication of what this cost Wykeham as it is acknowledged that he had paid the Framptons 300 marks (or £200) for this. As well as thus buying out their claim, Wykeham had also used the power of the king's court to enforce this as the quitclaim is in the form of a final concord before the king's justices, Robert de Thorp et al.¹²

What might have been Wykeham's purpose in acquiring this estate at this date? He had already been acquiring property in Oxford in the previous year (1369) in the area that was to become the site for New College. A landed endowment was vital to the success of his proposed college, and his astute project planning in providing such a vital resource, along with statutes, has been well acknowledged.¹³ Yet Oxford may perhaps not have been the initial intended destination for this acquisition. Still in 1370, on 9 October, Wykeham secured a licence from the lord of the manor, William Montagu, the earl of Salisbury, to allow Wykeham to grant Alton Barnes and its advowson, not to any possible foundation in Oxford, but rather to the prior and convent of the cathedral church of St Swithun in Winchester.¹⁴ As New College did not exist yet, this may have been a case of establishing the principle that Wykeham could make such a grant, or he may have conceived that the cathedral might be something of a holding company for estates for his possible college, or he may even have been considering his possible college in Winchester as the destination

⁸ New College Archives, Oxford, NCA 10053. Throughout this piece, references will be to the original deeds. These were numbered by Martin Culpeper (warden 1573–99) with a running number for each manor, and then later renumbered by Francis Steer, along with everything else in the archive, which scheme was published in Francis Steer, *The Archives of New College, Oxford* (London: Phillimore, 1974). These latter numbers are not chronological. They are cited here. The Alton Barnes deeds were also transcribed into a later medieval cartulary—*Registrum Secundum*—which initially is for deeds of the former alien priory of St Valery (ff. 1–131) but then includes, amongst others, deeds for Alton Barnes, and Shaw: NCA 9745, ff. 254r–260v. Michael Woodward, warden 1658–75, then arranged for a college tenant, William Ball, to transcribe all the college's deeds, by manor and then generally chronologically, into five volumes. Those for Alton Barnes and Shaw are in: NCA 9789, pp. 123–62. It is these last copies that are cited by Crowley in the Victoria county history volume as 'Mun. Reg. Evid. iii', Crowley, 'Alton Barnes', pp. 9–10.

⁹ NCA 10043.

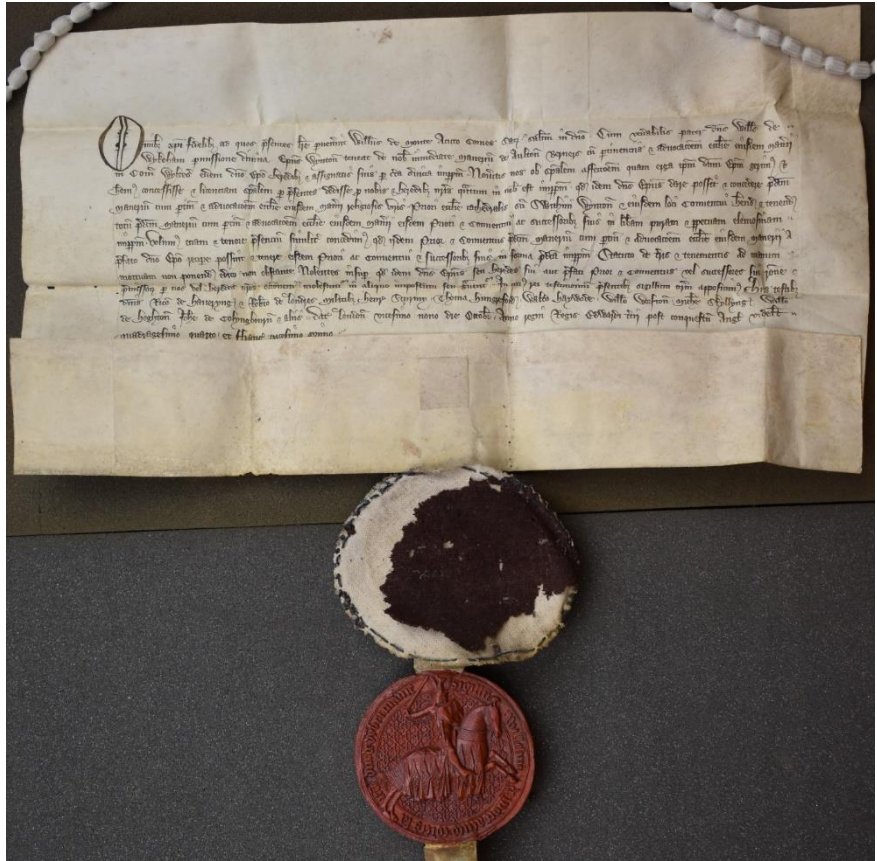
¹⁰ NCA 10055.

¹¹ NCA 10037.

¹² NCA 10064. For details on these document types such as gifts, quitclaims, final concords, and appointments of attorneys, see N. W. Alcock, *Old Title Deeds: A Guide for Local and Family Historians*, 2nd ed. (Chichester: Phillimore, 2001), pp. 89–93.

¹³ Davis, *William Wykeham*, p. 149.

¹⁴ NCA 10039.



The earl of Salisbury's for William Wykeham to grant Alton Barnes etc to Winchester Cathedral, 9 October 1370
 New College Archives, Oxford, NCA 10039
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Closeups of the earl of Salisbury's seal and counterseal, with the legend around the rim detailing his titles as earl of Salisbury and lord of Denbigh and Man, NCA 10039

for this estate. Furthermore, this 9 October licence is the first time that the manor of Shaw is included in this documentation. Adjacent to Alton Barnes and part of the ancient parish there, this reveals that Wykeham had designs on this property as well. He did not actually acquire it until 8 August 1376 when Isabella Rivers sold it to him, shortly after her then late husband Thomas had secured her association with him in holding its title in 1374/5.¹⁵

¹⁵ NCA 10049, 10032, Isabella's grant and appointment of attorneys; NCA 10046, 10052, Thomas's grants to transfer title to the two of them; Thomas had acquired its title through his first wife Joan Grimstead.

A grant of these properties to Winchester does not appear to have happened at this date, but Wykeham seems to be preparing the ground more for such a development with maybe either of his prospective projects in 1375. On 18 June, in his palace at Southwark, he secured separate quitclaims from John [Frampton], grandson of Walter, and the abovementioned John Kengrove of their rights in Alton Barnes and its advowson. These were affirmed shortly afterwards, on 25 June and 1 July respectively, by final concords in the king's court. For each of these Wykeham pays 200 marks (£133 6s. 8d.). Wykeham is being highly organised and efficient in going to such lengths and, in addition, the 18 June quitclaim by Frampton (called FitzWalter in the endorsement) is enrolled on the dorse of the king's Chancery roll as yet further security.¹⁶ With his title presumably thus confirmed and clarified, Wykeham then moved to secure a further licence from the earl of Salisbury on 29 October in 1375 enabling him to gift these properties, not now specifically to Winchester cathedral, but rather to any church, chantry, college, or religious establishment he may have wished.¹⁷ It looks as if Wykeham may well have been preparing for the possible foundation of New College at this stage, but then the Good Parliament and his fall from grace intervened.

Back in favour, and with New College founded in 1379, Wykeham sought further documentation from the earl of Salisbury in 1381 before he could perhaps move formally to grant Alton Barnes and its advowson to New College. Firstly, on 1 May, Salisbury confirmed Wykeham's acquisition of the properties. Then on 12 June, Salisbury gave Wykeham licence to grant the properties to the warden and scholars of the college called *Seinte Marie College of Wynchestre in Oxon*, the statute of mortmain notwithstanding.¹⁸ All would have seemed to be in place for the final licence to be secured from the king for such a mortmain grant, permitting property to be granted into the dead hand of an institution such as New College, and for Wykeham to make the grant. However, these documents were not drawn up until 1385. It may well be significant that these 1381 documents were being sealed at the time of the Peasants' Revolt which might have either disrupted Wykeham's plans or caused him to pause, or both.

So, it is not until 3 June 1385 that Wykeham secured a licence from the king (Richard II) allowing Wykeham to grant to New College the manors of Alton Barnes and Shaw, with the advowson of Alton Barnes, and also the manor of Weedon in Buckinghamshire and the reversion of the manors of Burnham and Greene in Somerset. The Wiltshire properties were then finally conferred on New College by Wykeham on the following 1 August (highlighting the licences of the king and the earl of Salisbury), with attorneys being appointed first by Wykeham on 3 August to deliver seisin, and then by Nicholas Wykeham warden and the scholars of New College on 4 August to receive seisin. One final element in this story of the acquisition of these properties was the ratification of this award by the earl of Salisbury, which was sealed on 9 December 1387. It declared that the warden and scholars, and their successors, were to hold these properties in perpetuity, unmolested, as has indeed been the case, with the earl of Salisbury's then warranty so far not being needed.¹⁹

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¹⁶ NCA 10048, 10054, 10062, 10065.

¹⁷ NCA 10035.

¹⁸ NCA 10044, 10045, 10036; the latter two are duplicates, both sealed by Salisbury, with Wykeham perhaps seeking to make assurance doubly sure.

¹⁹ NCA 9704, 10033, 10031, 10034, 10040. As a further tailpiece, the college secured a quitclaim from John Rivers to any interest in Shaw as late as 1411: NCA 10047.