

## A Sion College Miscellany

It is fitting that this magnificent library and College building is located within a couple of hundred yards of St Dunstan-in-the-West. Dr Thomas White, Founder of the College, was appointed vicar of that church at the age of 25 and held the rectory for the next fifty years; being eventually succeeded by an impecunious and somewhat impatient John Donne.

Canon Pearce, College historian, describes the Founder's principles of business as 'by no means heroic', but whilst he did have a number of preferments, in an age of temptation we may say that he forbore the worst excesses: in 1561 the vicar of St Dunstan's was found on investigation by Archbishop Parker to hold the parishes of 'Whiston, Doncaster, Rugby and Barnet in addition.'

He was an energetic young man, preaching a 20,000 word sermon in the open air twice within six months and, interestingly given the later focus of the College's library on the Oxford Movement, a zealous scourge of Papistry and any relics of it which he apprehended to remain in contemporary Anglican worship. His first known sermon begins with a litany of complaints about the disregard paid to the Sabbath; followed by twenty pages on the wickedness of London illustrated, he wrote, 'as briefly as I can, for I have been long and am afraid of the time'. I trust that if I am long in my speech you will be as forthright as the Founder in cutting me off!

On another occasion, called upon to commemorate the anniversary of the accession of Queen Elizabeth I, he spent 9,000 words by way of opening denouncing variously usury, covetousness, Anabaptists and Papism, only to realise 3,000 words from the end that he had 'overshot' himself and had yet to mention the Queen in whose name the address was given. The strong moral stance taken in his sermon did not prevent him from later accumulating a number of valuable positions, including the office of Chancellor of Salisbury Cathedral, a prebendary post at St Paul's, and canonries at Christ Church and Windsor. By the time of his middle age, he occupied what we might modestly call today a position of considerable emolument.

He married twice – the name of his first wife was, perhaps appropriately, Fortune - but both marriages were childless and on his death in 1624 he was able to dispose of a considerable legacy. He had no close relatives, and no significant personal bequests appear in his will.

Indeed, surviving evidence suggests that he was irritated in his declining years by idle and importuning members of his late wives' families who felt they had some claim on his bounty.

Despite the wealth that he had accumulated in life, he was a sincere and unostentatious man, and the main concern on the face of his will was for the poor of London. Sion was one of the results of that concern, originally being established as a dual foundation of an almshouse for ten men and women, and a college where the clergy of London could meet socially and 'maynetaine love in conversing together'. Other objects of his will were a weekly lecture for the edification of the inmates of Newgate prison (£40), a new pulpit for St Paul's Cathedral (£100) and the establishment at Oxford of Whyte's professorship in Moral Philosophy which, reflecting his own life perhaps more than its title, was for many years an unearned perquisite of the senior proctor, with no lecturing required.

So much for the man – what of his college?

White's executors worked quickly, and Sion was chartered in 1626. The first President was George Mountaigne, Bishop of London, and the Vice-President was John Donne. The post of Visitor, created in 1630, was filled by William Laud, Mountaigne's successor as Bishop of London, already halfway through his five years in post before translation to Canterbury.

By 1627 land had been acquired for the construction of the College's first premises, on a then secluded site between London Wall and Aldermanbury. No record survives of the form of the initial buildings, but we know that they contained lodging for a clerk, a hall for the clergy and an almshouse for ten male and ten female deserving paupers. Description of the gardens has, however, come down to us – in 1632 money was allocated for 'a wheelbarrow, roller and watering pott', and for rosemary, flowers and camomile to be planted 'next the bowling alley'; in 1637 an arbour was constructed on which were grown damsons, vines and gooseberries.

The library, for which Sion is still best known, was an afterthought. John Simson, White's executor, was watching the work on the new building with Thomas Wood, rector of St Michael Crooked Lane. 'What a chance', Wood suggested 'to build a long library as the upper story of the Almshouses'. Simson, it is said, had the grace to 'take suggestion as a cat laps milk'. He caused the library to be constructed as suggested, and endowed it with £16 per annum of his own money, with supplementary gifts from vicars, stationers, and Samuel Pepys topping up this sum.

He was remembered by a grateful College as its second Founder, with his arms in stained glass being suitably prominently placed in the Hall.

Their first buildings sadly did not last long, being completely destroyed in the Great Fire of 1666. A watercolour survives of the post-fire restoration, showing a sturdy but unornamented building. Canon Pearce writes, with the candour permitted only of an intimate, that 'neither before nor after the fire can Sion College be said to have added to the artistic grace of a city in which artistry was abundant; and it is not a little strange that Sir Christopher Wren, a clergyman's son though he was, apparently had no part, save as a subscriber to the cost, in the reconstruction of the most clerical of civic institutions.'

The records reveal that for most of the College's history, the most arduous duty that fell to the Visitor was presiding over the annual feast, an occasion that was taken seriously. The Visitor was always invited first, even if the Archbishop of Canterbury was to attend – a charming window into the postal service of late seventeenth century London is given by a minute from 1694 recording the despatch of invitations to the feast: '10pence was paid to the Clerks Servant for Wateridge to and from Fulham to invite the Bishop of London'.

Indeed, one of the few points at which the Visitor questioned the actions of the President occurred in 1815 when it was proposed to omit the annual feast as the library was under repair and the books stacked in the hall. The Visitor requested to see a copy of the Founder's will, the charter of the College and extracts from the Court register of similar resolutions before feeling able to grant the request.

He was right to take the matter seriously. A typical menu for the mid eighteenth century consisted of two courses, the first of which contained of 'a dish of salmon, soles, smelts, lobster, shrimp and dressing; a marrow pudding; ham and chickens with spinach; a 12 pigeon pie; salad; and a sirloin of beef.' The second course has a further 'dish of four lobsters, three chickens in a dish with butter gravy dressing and asparagus; and a suet pudding.' The food on that occasion came to £20, with another £5 for wines and tobacco; with eleven gallons of claret and three of port being consumed, in addition to two pounds of tobacco. Consuming a tenth of the College's annual income; the alarm of the Visitor at the prospect of cancellation is understandable.

By way of comparison the drinks bill for the 1921 Anniversary dinner has come down to us: the 73 guests collectively got through 10 bottles of port, 13 of white wine, 6 of claret, 5 of sherry, 1 of whisky,  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a bottle of Creme de Menthe and 150 cigars! A wag present was reported by the times to have observed that:

‘solid joys and lasting treasures  
none but Sion’s children know’

The Court of the College had weighty enough matters to contend with during its early years - the civil war, plague and fire all within the first forty – but evidence of laxity among its members did not tax its ingenuity for long. In 1661, a minute records that ‘whoever of the President and the Deanes bring not the key of the great Chest with them at any Court meeting shall pay 12d towards the buying of a booke for the library’ while in 1654 a half-hour glass was purchased, so that the members of Court could measure whether the delay in arrival of any of their fellows was sufficient to warrant a sixpence fine (increasing to twelve pence in the case of total absence)

By 1810 the College possessed the only public library within the walls of the city of London, and it had benefitted for a century from the provisions of a copyright act, entitling it to one of every book published in the City. It was commended by a reviewer in 1815 for its situation ‘away from the noise of the coaches, carts and wagons of the City’, but by the middle of the century the Court had begun to regret the secluded location of the old College, lamenting that ‘adventurous students from the more distant parts of the metropolis, however delighted they may be with the contents of the library, cannot carry away the books they desire to borrow without adding the expense of cab-hire to their annual subscription.’

In 1884 the Court succeeded in securing the passage of the Sion College Act, allowing it to sell the old premises for £57,000 – a handsome return, one might say, on the £2,450 paid for the site some 250 years earlier. The new building on the Embankment cost £28,000, and was opened by the Prince of Wales, who remarked ‘Of your library I need say little. The high place which it occupies among similar institutions is well known and the extent and excellence of its contents are universally acknowledged.’

It *was* a great library. Its holdings included 80 incunables (European books printed from movable type before 1501), and it housed a copy of the first book to be printed in the English language – not a work of prayer or philosophy but a French courtly romance of 1474. It also had first book to be printed in City of London, 6 years later – this time a more seemly latin discourse on Aristotle, manuscript copies of Wyclif’s Old and New Testaments, and a Psalter dating from 1270 once owned by Simon de Meopham, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1327.

The Prince of Wales, or ‘Tum Tum’ as he was known on account of his girth, might have said little on the subject of the library, but it is worth a moment considering the history of the site itself.

Strictly speaking, the room in which we are now standing would have been several feet out into the river until the mid eighteenth century, when it was gradually reclaimed. The land immediately north of the present Embankment was, by the tenth century, a marshy link between the cities of London and Westminster, which gradually developed into some of the most desirable real estate in the kingdom. The first known building on the site as it recedes from the present shoreline was Salisbury house, the medieval London home of the Bishops of Salisbury. There is an illustration of it on page 13 of the brief history booklet. At that time, Fleet Street and the Strand ran parallel to the sandy shore of the river, along which were ranged the palaces of the some of the wealthiest of London’s inhabitants in what became one of the first true suburbs of the old city.

Salisbury House was bought by the Earl of Dorset in 1564, bringing with it the living of St Dunstan in the West, which a decade later he was to grant to the Founder. The whole area was destroyed by the Great Fire, and Dorset house as it had become was replaced with a theatre designed by Wren. This opened in 1671 and lasted for half a century, but by the 1720s had itself been superseded by a timber yard and wharf - the current line of Carmelite Street is that of the old Whitefriars Dock. Such usage was common in the period and much of what is now the Embankment was covered with wharves and factories; the 12 year old Charles Dickens worked at Warrens Blacking Warehouse close to the present site of Charing Cross station.

In 1814 the wharf was replaced by the City of London Gas Works, providing town gas from coal, a smoky photo of which is also included in the ‘brief history’. Finally with the coming of

the Embankment, the gas works was cut off from the river and its source of coal, and subsequently re-located to Barking, just in time for Sion to acquire the site in 1884.

The architect chosen by the Court to construct the new building was Arthur Blomfield, the son of Charles Blomfield, who had been Bishop of London from 1828-1856, and was a fellow and visitor of the College. He was a prominent man in his period, also having designed the Royal College of Music, Selwyn College Cambridge, Magdalen College School in Oxford, and having restored the then Saviour's Southwark, now better known as Southwark Cathedral.

Although principally identified with the gothic revival, of which Sion is an excellent example, he could also turn his hand to a Roman Basilica (St Barnabas in Oxford, leading church of the Tractarian Movement) and unusual materials, designing what was for a hundred years the tallest wooden church in the world – St George's Cathedral in Georgetown, Guyana.

The Gothic Revival was an appropriate style for Sion to adopt: the library had become a well-known resource on the Oxford Movement by the later nineteenth century, and the developments led by Pusey, Newman, and Wilberforce were reflected by a shift away from the spare classical forms of the previous two hundred years towards an aesthetic reflecting the glory of Christian civilisation – in the later Victorian period classical architecture was regarded by some as ungodly.

Blomfield therefore designed the present building in the perpendicular style, with columns and corbels of Portland stone. The ancient look was, however, successfully combined with the latest Victorian technology – the stairs are of 'granolithic concrete', the wooden roof was treated with cyanite to render it fireproof, and an iron girder bridge was used to carry the weight of the old porch, which sat directly atop today's District and Circle line.

The College has had to weather many storms since then, from a dishonest librarian in the 30s to the twin trials of fire and water during the Second World War, the most serious of which came when a burst main flooded the basement stack, destroying 6,000 rare books. The sale of the site itself in 1996 was a sad day for many, but the current owners have done an excellent job of restoring and using the building to the full, and the books of the library have not been dispersed, with the older material now in the fitting setting of Lambeth Palace.

Three hundred and eighty three years after its foundation, the College's office is just across the road from where it all began on Fleet Street, and, judging by this evening at least, the Founder's aim of creating a college where the clergy of London could meet socially and 'maynetaine love in conversing together' continues to be richly served.

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15 July 2009