

St. John, the College and the Merchant Taylors' Company

My job today is to answer the question, why are we here? Or to put it another way, why should we be interested in St. John the Baptist here at St. John's? Well, perhaps the answer to that is obvious. But to put it a better way: why are we St. John Baptist college? And to answer that we need to ask who the founder was.

He was Sir Thomas White. Born at the turn of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries to relatively humble origins, he was apprenticed to a merchant and rose through the ranks of the Merchant Taylors' Company, becoming Master of the Company in 1535. In 1544 he was elected an Alderman of London before serving as sheriff in 1547 and Lord Mayor in 1553. In this capacity it fell to him to arrest Sir Thomas Wyatt who had led a potentially dangerous, but ultimately rather desultory, rebellion against the newly crowned queen, Mary Tudor.¹ Perhaps because of this, White apparently became close to Mary and it is in this context that we must view the founding of the college.

The monasteries had been dissolved in 1538-40, along with the monastic colleges in Oxford like the Cistercian St. Bernard's, which had occupied the site here that White was to purchase. The chantries followed in 1548 and the colleges of Oxford and Cambridge very nearly went with them. White had first hand experience of how disastrous this could be. The Chantries Act cost the Merchant Taylors' Company over £2,000 which they raised by selling property worth over a quarter of their income.² Though, in 1555, there was no reason to suppose that Mary's reign would be as short-lived as her brother's, it was still an odd time to found something so precarious a quasi-religious institution unless you were absolutely confident of the queen's support.

In fact, it seems likely that the founding of St. John's was meant by White, quite deliberately, to be part of Mary's and Cardinal Pole's counter-reformation. By the time the college was two years old Elizabeth was on the throne and though most of the fellows appointed by White conformed (as did Sir Thomas himself) to the thirty-nine articles, the fellowship had a crypto-catholic feel to it. By 1564, more than a dozen of the fellows had converted back to Rome, including Gregory Martin, the principal translator of the Douai-Rheims Bible, and the

¹ See White's entry in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*

² M Davies & A Saunders, *The History of the Merchant Taylors' Company* (Leeds, 2004), 97

founder's own protégé, Edmund Campion. It seems certain that the founder was aware of their beliefs because when Robert Horne, on his return from exile under Mary, was made bishop of Winchester, and therefore Visitor of the college, White neutered him by making Sir William Cordell, Master of the Rolls, and William Roper, son-in-law to Sir Thomas More, de facto visitors for life. These two, like their friend, were conformist, but remained sympathetic to traditional Catholicism, and so provided a measure of protection to the crypto-catholics of St. John's while Bishop Horne was busy removing their counterparts from the other Oxford colleges over which he had authority.³

If the founding of the college was intended to assist in the re-catholicization of England, then the dedication to St. John is interesting, as it may well have been a deliberate attempt to boost the cult of the saints that had been weakened by the iconoclasm of Henry VIII and Edward VI. We are so used to colleges named after saints – St. Anne's, St. Hilda's, St. Peter's to name but a few – that it is something of a shock to realize that virtually all of them are modern. In 1555 only one college was already dedicated to a saint – Magdalen (though Magdalene, St. Catherine's and St. John's existed at Cambridge).

The colleges can mostly be divided into two sorts – those named after their founders and those with a religious dedication (Univ and Brasenose stand apart). The first category includes Merton and Balliol, as well as Lincoln and Exeter (whose founders were bishops of those sees) and even Queen's, if one accepts the polite fiction that Philippa of Hainault was the real founder, and Robert de Eglesfield merely her agent. One can see why Sir Thomas White and his friend Sir Thomas Pope, who founded Trinity in the same year, as the first lay founders since the Balliols might feel too modest to name their colleges for themselves. Of those with a religious dedication most were to Mary, the mother of Christ – Lincoln (thus falling into both categories), Oriel and New. The more recently founded Christ Church and Corpus Christi were named directly for Christ himself, and All Souls, as ever, is the exception.

A few decades ago there was much debate about whether the preamble of mid-sixteenth century wills could be used to determine the religious beliefs of the testator.⁴ The preamble is

³ See WH Stevenson & HE Salter, *The Early History of St. John's College, Oxford* (Oxford, 1939), 113-41

⁴ See for example, M. L. Zell, 'The Use of Religious Preambles as a Measure of Religious Beliefs in the Sixteenth Century', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 50 (1977), p. 246; J. D. Alsop, 'Religious Preambles in

that section where the testator grants his soul to ‘almighty God’ or the ‘Virgin Mary and all the saints’ or to ‘Christ my redeemer’ or some such. It’s an interesting exercise to adapt this methodology to the names of the sixteenth century colleges. In this analysis, Corpus Christi and Trinity would be seen as neutral – terms which both Catholics and Protestants could happily use. Jesus, as befits an Elizabethan foundation, is indisputably Protestant, while St. John the Baptist can be seen as traditionalist or Catholic because it suggests the need for a saintly intercessor between the supplicant and the Redeemer. Naming the college for a saint made a statement that repudiated the policies of Edward VI and hearkened back to the founder’s youth before the Break with Rome.

But why this saint? Why John the Baptist? The answer to this lies with the Merchant Taylors’ Company of which Sir Thomas White was such a prominent member – or to give it its full title, ‘The Guild of Merchant Taylors of the Fraternity of St. John the Baptist in the City of London’. As this name suggests, the Company began as a fraternity of tailors, probably late in the thirteenth century. The Elizabethan antiquary John Stow claimed he had seen evidence that the fraternity was given jurisdiction over all the London tailors by Edward I in 1300, but no letters patent were then enrolled. There are, however, extant letters patent from 1327 in which the king grants the tailors the right to an annual meeting and responsibility for regulating the trade.⁵

St. John the Baptist was adopted as the patron of the fraternity from the very beginning. He was often chosen as the patron saints of tailors, probably because of the belief that he made his own simple clothing in the desert. In fact, he is just one of a number of patron saints of tailors – we might alternatively have been St. Martin’s College or even St. Homobonus College (which sounds to me like a college from a detective story by Ronald Knox!).

The Baptist was celebrated by the fraternity in an annual feast, sometimes on his Decollation, but more normally on his Nativity. The community of their fraternity was emphasised on

Early Modern English Wills as Formulae’, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 40 (1989), pp. 20-2; C. Marsh, ‘In the Name of God? Will-Making and Faith in Early Modern England’ in G. H. Martin and P. Spufford (eds.) *The Records of the Nation* (Woodbridge, 1990), pp. 243-4

⁵ Davies & Saunders, 8-11

these occasions by the wearing of their livery robes and hoods and feasting in Tailor's Hall in what was then Broad Street, significantly acquired on 24 June 1392.⁶

But we must not forget that religious observance was at the heart of the fraternity. By the end of the fourteenth century they employed two full time chaplains and maintained two chapels, one in Tailors' Hall and the other being the chapel of St. John by the north door of St. Paul's cathedral. Both were in frequent use, but the Nativity of the Baptist was clearly a special occasion – the bishop of London himself said mass in their chapel on 24 June 1454.⁷

There was in fact, a tri-partite structure to the feast day. The Company would first elect a new Master and Wardens for the coming year before attending Mass in the chapel, after which the new officers would be set in their places by their predecessors. The third part was the feast, a great meal accompanied by minstrels, which took weeks to prepare. A menu from the 1430s includes fifteen different dishes, including pork, capons, venison, rabbits, pheasants, partridges, and (yes!) even swan.⁸

Returning to the college, we can see how these influences on Sir Thomas White affected his new foundation. The college was named for St. John the Baptist in the very first Foundation Deed of 29 May 1555.⁹ This did not found the college as a practising institution, but it did create it as a corporate body and hand over seisin, that is legal possession, of the founder's endowment to the first President and four named fellows. The college actually came into complete practical existence on the nativity of the Baptist in 1557 – in other words exactly 454 years ago today (though we count the technical foundation back to this deed of 1555).

The founder drew up statutes for the college on its creation, but he continued to modify them and the official version – in which he signed every page – was compiled in 1562.¹⁰

Surprisingly they are dedicated not to the Baptist, but the Trinity, and the picture on the opening page may be intended to be the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, or the Baptist and Elizabeth – or perhaps both. In addition to this marvellous frontispiece, the draughtsman, a

⁶ *Ibid.*, 9, 14-15

⁷ *Ibid.*, 23-4

⁸ *Ibid.*, 31-2, 36

⁹ St. John's College Archives [SJCA] MUN I.A.3

¹⁰ SJCA FN II.A.1

fellow called John Bereblock who also drew the pictures of the colleges for Elizabeth's visit to Oxford in 1566,¹¹ of which the Divinity School is best known, also added little marginal drawings in the early statutes and though one of them refers to St. John (Jesus Johanni faveat) this is surely the wrong St. John! This is the Cambridge St. John!

The statutes insisted that elections to fellowships were to take place on the Nativity of the Baptist, just as elections of officers had at the Merchant Taylors'. However, in 1566 the founder (who could override his own statutes at will) decided to allot most of the fellowships to pupils of the newly founded Merchant Taylors' School, the foundation of which he had been heavily involved with, and to give the election to the Company. The Statutes continued to state that elections were to take place on 24 June, but there were now no elections to be held. It does seem, though, that new scholars (which are what the probationary fellows were called) came up shortly after the feast.¹²

The remaining parts of the tri-partite structure borrowed from the Merchant Taylors' did, however, proceed. The feast of the Baptist was listed in the statutes as one of the major festivals on which mass should be heard. The early accounts, however, only include payment for communion wine at Easter and it's possible that this community of crypto-Catholics, perhaps even with the founder's blessing, shunned the Elizabethan eucharist. The college's first chaplain, Cuthbert Mayne – I should say St. Cuthbert Mayne, for he was to be the Elizabethan proto-martyr and was canonised with St. Edmund Campion in 1970 – claimed that he only once said Mass at St. John's and every other time held a 'dry Communion'.¹³ Exactly what this constituted is not clear, but almost certainly he left out a key part of the service. In this case, perhaps the fellows, all of whom must have been complicit, only wanted to go through this farcical procedure once a year. By the 1580s, however, communion wine was bought regularly for All Souls, Christmas, various Holy Week services including Easter, Whitsun and the feast of St. John; though curiously they referred to it as Midsummer day. The significance of the day, however, can be seen by the commission in 1620 of an 'anthem

¹¹ See L Durning, *Queen Elizabeth's Book of Oxford* (Oxford, 2006)

¹² Stevenson & Salter, 146-7

¹³ A Hegarty, *A Biographical Register of St. John's College, 1555-1660* (Oxford Historical Society n.s. xliii, 2011), 364

of St. John' from Michael East, organist of Lichfield cathedral, and the most famous composer of the day.¹⁴

And after the eucharist came the feast. The statutes allowed an increase in commons (that is the food served in Hall) for all the major festivals, but the largest increase was reserved for Christmas and the Nativity of St. John the Baptist.¹⁵ In the early seventeenth century the Hall was decked with evergreen boughs for both, and it is interesting to note that during the Interregnum this seems to have continued, although the eucharist was no longer celebrated in the Baptist's honour.

We should also, perhaps, note two important events in the history of the college that occurred not on the Nativity of the Baptist, but the Decollation, that is 29 August. When John Buckeridge resigned the Presidency in 1611 to become bishop of Rochester, a bitter election was fought with William Laud beating John Rawlinson by one vote. Appeals were made to the Visitor and eventually James I himself decided to settle the matter. Appropriately, but probably coincidentally, on 29 August 1611 both parties appeared before the king who after a day's debate – James I in his element! –declared that it was 'no further corrupt and partial than all elections are liable to be' and Laud was duly elected.¹⁶

Exactly twenty-five years later Laud returned to his old college in pomp. Over the past three years he had been using the profits of the sees of London and then Canterbury to fund the building of Canterbury Quad, where we are now. In 1636 it was complete and, no doubt deliberately, on the feast of the Decollation of the Baptist, Laud threw a very great feast indeed. Not only was the whole University present, but so was the King and Queen and the whole royal court. The quad had cost Laud £5,553 to build; the party cost a further £2,666, nearly half the cost of the building. The menu reads much like the Merchant Taylors' feast two centuries earlier – capons, rabbits, pheasants, quail, ducks, does, and yes again – swans! The centrepiece though, at a cost of £540, and made by the royal confectioner, was the entire university – doctors, professors, masters and so on, all made out of marzipan and paste. This

¹⁴ SJCA ACC I.A.12 f.76r

¹⁵ *Statutes of the Colleges of Oxford ... St John's College* (Oxford, 1853), 46

¹⁶ WH Hutton, *William Laud* (4th ed., London, 1913), 12

was, perhaps, Laud's greatest moment, and it is fitting that it should have been on a feast of St. John.¹⁷

There is one other way that the college has commemorated John the Baptist. He has long been associated iconographically with the lamb of God, particularly with the lamb carrying a flag. It can be seen in the brass in the Library foyer and on our new organ in the chapel. It is most obvious, of course, in the pub on St Giles which has been owned by the college since it opened in 1613.¹⁸ It seems to me that if we were to follow this symposium with the sung eucharist and then a trip to the Lamb and Flag, this is precisely the sort of tripartite commemoration of the feast of John the Baptist that the Merchant Taylors and the early fellows of St. John's might recognize!

¹⁷ HM Colvin, *The Canterbury Quadrangle* (Oxford, 1988), 12-13

¹⁸ SJCA MUN I.35