# INTRODUCTION



Cambridge University Press is both the oldest printing and publishing house in the world and the oldest university press. It is founded on a royal charter granted to the University in 1534 and has been operating continuously as a printing and publishing business since the first Cambridge book was printed in 1584. By the narrowest of margins it is older than the other great English university press, Oxford, which did not issue its first book until 1585.

It is in fact very hard for an ordinary firm, especially a family firm, to last for that length of time. The family may die out; more probably the firm is taken over by another family or firm, or in modern times becomes part of a great industrial or commercial complex – and in losing its independence loses much of its identity. Only if it is owned and run by a corporate entity which cannot itself be taken over in that way can it survive for hundreds of years, and there are not many such bodies.

The University of Cambridge is such a body. It was founded at the beginning of the thirteenth century. It is itself one of those independent charitable corporations, founded on an official charter which has the force of law, which are characteristically English. So old as to seem an indissoluble part of the fabric of English social life, they are none the less independent of the State, and self-governing. The University of Cambridge, like its constituent colleges, exists and uses its funds entirely in order to exercise its scholarly functions, which are traditionally expressed as 'education, religion, learning and research'. University and colleges together are like a federation of charitable trusts acting in concert with each other. Though they receive funds from central government, they also have their own endowment and income and these are devoted entirely to the acquisition, conservation and dissemination of knowledge, to the education of students within the walls of the university itself, and to the spreading of knowledge in the wider world.

Clearly, institutions or facilities which have the aim of conserving knowledge (as in libraries) or conveying it (by printing and publishing) are

crucial to those functions. A university is still primarily a place where books are used and written. An ancient university had from its very beginning to make provision for their supply.

## THE FIRST STATIONERS

Before the invention of printing, books were handwritten in single copies and were scarce and valuable commodities. For hundreds of years these manuscripts supported a number of trades: parchment- and papermakers, inkmakers, the scribes themselves, bookbinders, and the middlemen who traded in them. These last were called stationers, a term which survives. Many stationers sold new and second-hand manuscript books, and, to make ends meet, also engaged in one of the productive skills themselves. Often they were bookbinders, since manuscripts and later printed books were usually transported unbound to the place of sale and then bound to suit the taste of the purchaser.

Apart from the great centres of population such as capital cities, stationers were most likely to be found in places of learning, especially the university towns. The university found itself regulating this in the same way as other trades, so that the interests of its members were protected. It appointed its own official stationers, who had recognised status and functions, wore a special academic gown and attended certain ceremonies. In particular they were valuers of books as well as suppliers. In days when a book was a major item of expenditure, books could be used as pledges or guarantees of a loan; poor students would often deposit a book as a 'caution' in this way and the stationers would supervise the transaction. Apart from that, they were responsible for copying, binding, stocking and selling the books that the libraries, teachers and students needed.

From medieval times, members of trades and professions have had their associations. In England there still exist ancient guilds, especially in the City of London. These are the descendants of the old trade guilds which regu-

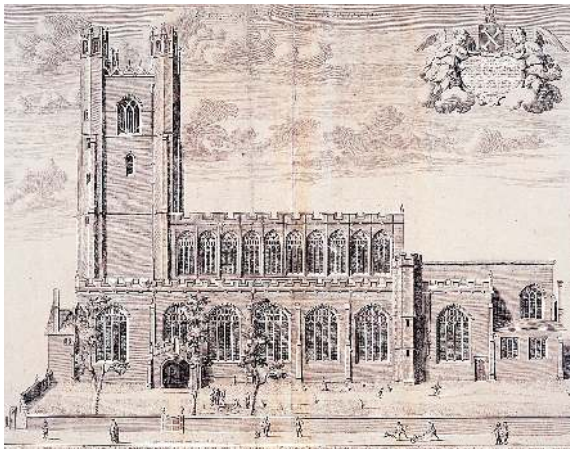
lated entry to a craft or trade, supervised apprenticeship, recognised the transition to the higher grades of freeman and master, acted to some extent as provident societies for members who had fallen on bad times, and in general protected the interests of members. In modern terms, they were something between a trade union, an employers' association and a lobby for a specific interest. Stationers in the University of Cambridge would have been members of two corporate bodies, university and guild: the potential for tension or conflict between them is an important element of this story.

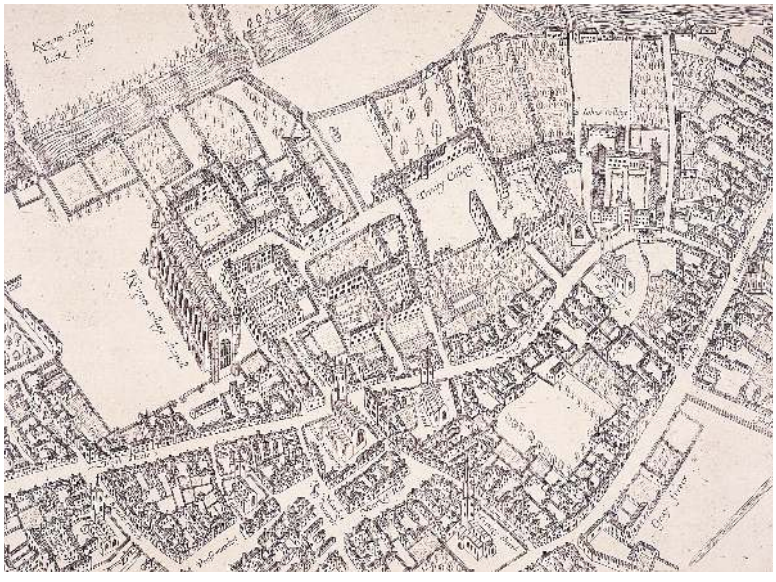
Printing was invented in Germany in the 1450s. It spread relatively quickly into Switzerland, North Italy, the Low Countries and France and printed books began to be a part of international trade. But for a generation or two printing was a European skill and printed books an import trade. Caxton set up his press in London in 1476 and slowly an English trade in printed books began, centred in London, especially in the bookselling area round St Paul's Cathedral.

In Cambridge too the stationers had their bookselling area. As it is today, the old street we call Trinity Street, then called the High Street, was their centre, especially the area where it passed the University Church, St Mary the Great. Here, opposite the Old Schools, the teaching and examining centre, was the best place to attract trade. Great St Mary's was almost the stationers' church: a number of them were churchwardens, and some were buried there. As at St Paul's in London, it was also possible to set up a stall in the churchyard, or even against the church wall, and trade there, though stationers and printers also worked from permanent premises in the High Street and nearby.

The Cambridge Stationers included a noticeable number of Europeans from the Low Countries and three in particular play an important part in this story in the early 1500s. Garret Godfrey, Nicholas Speryng and Segar Nicolson all came from the Netherlands. They were what was called 'denizens', that is, foreigners with a right to settle and trade alongside native citizens. Nicolson was younger than the others, may have been a second-

Great St Mary's Church: a number of stationers were churchwardens and some chose to be buried here, though few gravestones of this period remain.





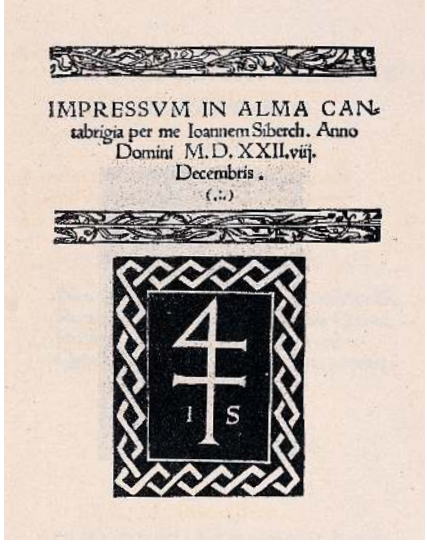
Hamond's map of Cambridge, 1592. Hamond's very large plan shows in detail the contemporary layout of Cambridge's streets. The old High Street is now Trinity Street and King's Parade. Note the houses in front of King's Chapel and the existence of University Street, where the Senate House now stands, between the Old Schools and Great St Mary's. Market Square was then much smaller, with houses on much of the present open space. John Siberch, the first printer in Cambridge, lived and worked where the nineteenth-century building of Caius now faces the old bookshop on the corner site. Thomas Thomas worked in University Street, directly opposite Great St Mary's. In the seventeenth century the University Printing House moved into the Market Hill area; one site was next to the old Rose Inn on the North side, one 'at the South side of the Steeple of Great St Mary's', and one where Rose Crescent joins Market Hill. Thomas Buck used the old building which had once been the refectory of the former Augustinian Friary in Free School Lane (cf. the modern Friar House nearby). John Field moved the Press to Queens' Lane, where it stayed until it moved into the Old Press site behind the Pitt Building early in the nineteenth century.

generation denizen, had been a student at Gonville Hall (now Gonville and Caius College) and like many members of that college was what later was called a Protestant. All three must have been aware of the reforming movement in Germany, and Godfrey and Speryng were also acquainted with the great scholar and writer Erasmus, who came to Cambridge in 1511–14. That was before the new ideas became open revolt, but already contacts through the book trades with European thinkers had a tinge of the forbidden. The most direct route for trade was by sea: the great European ports at the mouths of the Rhine and Scheldt opened the way by river and sea from the heart of Germany to England by the East coast ports; indeed you could sail right through to Cambridge. So it was possible, but dangerous, to import the books of reforming thinkers.

Luther nailed his theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg in 1517, was excommunicated in 1520, and published his German translation of the New Testament in 1522, inaugurating a century or more of strife. In the

intellectual struggle the new art of printing was a crucial instrument. The freedom to publish, as against the desire of all the contesting parties to control what was published in their own territories, became literally a burning issue: Nicolson went to prison for his beliefs and later saw a friend burnt on Jesus Green. There was in Cambridge in the 1520s a small Protestant group of advanced thinkers, to which he belonged. But the University authorities were traditionally orthodox, suspicious of new thinking, and prepared to be repressive. For a time, it must have been difficult to distinguish between the scholarly innovators, like Erasmus, who wanted to reform scholarship, and the more radical people who wanted to reform the whole Church.

Just at the moment when the old world was about to dissolve in conflict, the first printer arrived in Cambridge. John Lair of Siegburg in Germany was known in Cambridge as John Siberch. He was known to Erasmus and to the Cambridge humanist scholars and came to Cambridge in 1520 to set up a small press. He was given a loan by the University and it is likely that he was accepted as a stationer, simply differing from the others in that his specialism was printing. He produced ten books in the new roman types – a sign of humanist sympathies. More traditional books went on being set in the old 'gothic' or blackletter type for the rest of the century, and Siberch himself used blackletter for the little 'selling lines' he printed in English. He lived and worked in a tenement called 'The King's Arms' in a long-since demolished street where the Trinity Street range of Gonville and Caius now stands. He probably had one press and a single apprentice, doing most of the work himself. He had a small amount of Greek type, and so called himself 'the first printer in both languages in England'. (The two languages were Latin, the international language of the educated, and Greek, the language of the new humanist scholarship.) He left in 1523 and went back to Germany, probably because he found he could not make a living as a printer in Cambridge. This would have been because the local sale was not enough to support him, and the London stationers would not have been pleased to




John Siberch's colophon or imprint, from the title-page of Sir Thomas Elyot's *Hermathena*, 1522.

face competition from a newcomer and a foreigner. And indeed legislation was passed at that time to restrict the entry of foreigners into the English book trades; it was beginning to be felt that the national economic interest must be protected, and a national industry built up.

## THE CHARTER

After this brief start or false dawn there was no printing in Cambridge until 1584 – a long gap. But the University took an absolutely crucial step to establish its right to be, when it chose, a centre of printing and publishing. In 1529 it petitioned the Lord Chancellor to formalise its traditional right to appoint its own stationers, and in 1534 Cambridge received from the king Letters Patent (in other words, a royal charter) recognising that right. The Letters Patent are the essential foundation of the University's printing and

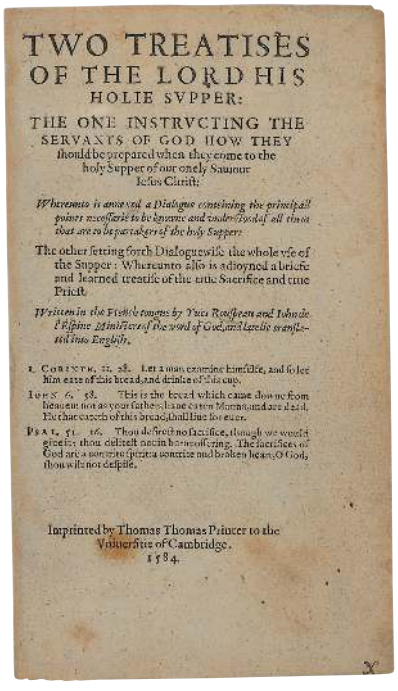
Henry VIII's Letters Patent of 1534. Although it was written on vellum, which is very durable, the document, now in the University Archives, has deteriorated over the years; but the fine initial with the king's portrait inside it and the large first line of script are still discernible.

publishing tradition, and were the key document in all its later disputes with other authorities, and in its own recurrent examinations of its role.

Because of its importance, the whole document, in English translation, is given at the end of this book. The substantive points may be summarised: there were to be three stationers *or printers*; they could print 'all manner of books'; they could sell them wherever they chose; the only licensing or censoring authority they had to recognise was that of the University itself, exercised by the Vice-Chancellor and three doctors. In effect, the University was being recognised as independent of any attempted control by other authorities.

Not surprisingly, Godfrey, Speryng and Nicolson were duly appointed the three Stationers to the University. The office went on being filled from now on until the alternative 'or printer' was adopted in 1583, and the office of University Printer has been held ever since.

Some years before this happened, the London Guild of Stationers also formalised its status. In 1557 it became, by similar royal charter, the Stationers' Company. It was given the right to restrict entry into the book-selling, printing and other book trades, which were to be concentrated in London, and to control publication by maintaining a register in which all new publications had to be entered. From the point of view of the central authority this was a way of securing political control by centralising the trade and making it self-policing for fear of losing its privileges. At once, the stage was set for conflict with anyone outside London who attempted to set up a press and operate it independently. At much the same time some of the London printers were beginning to operate like publishers, for instance by commissioning printing from those who were willing to remain sub-contractors or had not the capital to do anything else. Another important tactic was to acquire the monopoly (what we should now call the copyright) in a particular title that sold well or – more threatening to the interests of others – to have a monopoly in a whole category of books. In particular, the right to print and sell the English Bible – the best seller of all – was begin-



TWO TREATISES
OF THE LORD HIS
HOLIE SVPPER:
THE ONE INSTRVCTING THE
SERVANTS OF GOD HOW THEY
should be prepared when they come to the
holy Supper of our onely Saviour
Iesus Christ:

*Whereunto is annexed a Dialogue containing the principall*
*points necessarie to be knowne and understood of all them*
*that are to be partakers of the holy Supper:*

The other setting forth Dialogueswise the whole vse of
the Supper: Whereunto also is adioyned a briefe
and learned treatise of the true Sacrifice and true
Priest.

*Written in the French tongue by Two Ministers of the word of God, and lately trans-*
*lated into English.*

1. CORINTH. 11. 28. Let a man examine himselfe, and so let
him eate of this bread, and drinke of this cup.

IOHN 6. 58. This is the bread which came downe from
heaven: not as your fathers haue eaten Manna, and are dead.
He that eateth of this bread, shall liue for euer.

PSAL. 51. 16. Thou desirest no sacrifice, though we would
giue it: thou delitest not in burnt offering. The sacrifices of
God are a contrite spirite: a contrite and broken heart, O God,
thou wilt not despise.

Imprinted by Thomas Thomas Printer to the
Vniuersitie of Cambridge.
1584.

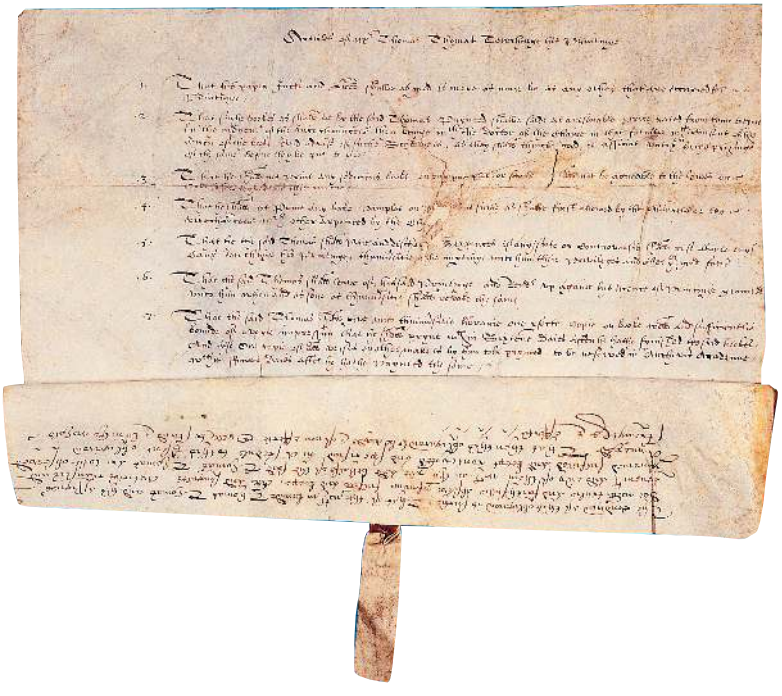
ABOVE Title page of the first Cambridge University Press book, *Two Treatises of the Lord His Holie Supper* , 1584, printed by Thomas Thomas.

RIGHT The articles of Thomas Thomas (appointed University Printer in 1583). These enjoined him, among other things, to present to the University Library a bound copy of every book he printed.

ning to be concentrated in a few hands. First of all, it was a matter of the right to print in certain formats, but after 1577 the then Royal Printer Christopher Barker acquired a royal patent which seemed to give him and his heirs and assigns the sole right to print all Bibles in English.

## THE FIRST CAMBRIDGE PRESS

When the University decided that it would at last exercise its right to appoint its own printer, it knew that it would have a fight on its hands. Documents still survive which indicate that in 1583 it was securing its position by writing to influential statesmen who could be counted on to back their old University. In that year, on 3 May, a Grace was passed appointing Thomas Thomas University Printer. (A Grace is a proposal presented to the Senate, the University's controlling assembly, asking for a favouring vote.) Translated, the record states:



> It was agreed that *Magister* Thomas [i.e. Thomas was an MA of the University] should be one of your three printers of books with all the privileges assigned to those printers …

It is clear that the Charter had been consulted, and the University was being careful to invoke its terms. Thomas sent to London for his equipment, only to find that it had been impounded by the Stationers, who had become aware of what was intended, and meant to assert their rights. The University went into action, called on the aid of its powerful friends with well-considered letters, and the press and types were released. Here was a victory over the Stationers, but it was only the first skirmish in a long war. Thomas issued his first books in 1584, and ever since that date there has been continuous printing and publishing in Cambridge. The very first Cambridge book was *Two Treatises of the Lord His Holie Supper.*

* * *

Thomas Thomas, the first Cambridge Printer, was born in 1553 and went to Eton and on to King's College, where he became a Fellow. He married the widow of a stationer bookbinder, and carried on the business. He was a Latin scholar of ability and a very pious man with Presbyterian sympathies. Some of the books he printed furthered the religious cause, but he also edited a Latin text. His most famous and successful publication was a Latin dictionary which he had revised and edited himself and which went on being reprinted in the next century. He was thirty-five when he died, having been Printer for five years. His successor John Legate wrote this tribute to him in the eleventh edition of the Dictionary:

> He was about 30 years ago a famous Printer among your Cantabrigians; yes, something more than a printer such as we now are, who understand the Latin that we print no more than Bellerophon the letters that he carried, and who sell in our shops nothing of our own except the paper 'black with the press's sweat'. But he, a companion of the Stephenses [the Estiennes, the great dynasty of French scholar printers] and the other, very few printers of the true kind and

*The first Cambridge press*

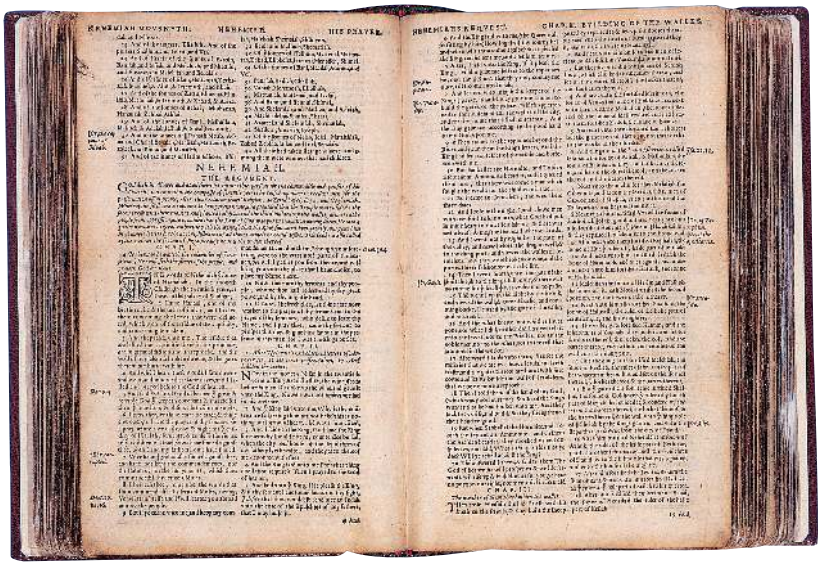

DICTIONA-
RIVM LIN-
GVAE LATINAE
ET ANGLICANAE.
IN HOC OPERE QVID
sit præstitum, & ad superiores
accessionis adiectum, do-
cebit epistola ad Le-
ctorem.
Cantebrigiæ, ex officina THOMAE
THOMASII, inclytæ Acade-
miæ Typographi.

Thomas's own Dictionary of the Latin Language. The inscription at the head of the title-page suggests that this copy was presented to the University Library, though no separate record exists of its arrival.

best omen, was of the opinion that it was men of learning, thoroughly imbued with academic studies, who should give themselves to cultivating and rightly employing that illustrious benefit sent down from heaven and given to aid mankind and perpetuate the arts.

Thomas had one press, perhaps two or three apprentices, and worked in his shop in the Regent Walk, immediately opposite the West door of Great St Mary's. He was buried in the churchyard in 1588 and was succeeded by Legate.

Legate himself established an important precedent: he printed a New Testament in 1590 and then the first Cambridge Bible in 1591. It was a small octavo edition of the very popular Geneva Bible, in roman type. This at once sparked off another conflict with the London Stationers, and especially with Barker, who claimed that all Bibles were his monopoly. The University, going back to the words of the charter, relied on the fact that their Printer was entitled to print 'all manner of books' – and that must



The first Cambridge Bible, 1591. Legate printed his small octavo Bible in roman type using the Geneva Version, then the preferred version of puritan readers. It had the advantage of portable small format, readable type, verse numbers for easy reference, and useful editorial matter. It was the Bible of Shakespeare and Bunyan, and of the first settlers in North America.