

PART I

1. THE MEDIEVAL ARCHIVES

The earliest archives of the university, mainly charters of privilege from kings and bishops, were kept with the other valuables belonging to the university in the Common Chest. This practice was general, both for private persons and corporate bodies of all kinds, and indeed the statutes of nearly every medieval college in Oxford and Cambridge, and of the universities themselves, enjoin the safekeeping in chests of the common seal, the plate, the charters, and other important documents. The chests in which these precious articles were deposited were made of stout oak planks from two to three inches thick, bound with iron bands and secured by locks and padlocks of different wards, so as to require the presence of several officials at the same time to open them. One such chest, dating from the later Middle Ages, is still in the registry's room and has five different locks. The keys were held by the chancellor (or vice-chancellor), the two proctors, and two non-regent masters chosen for this purpose. Regulations for the election of these masters, for opening the Common Chest and for keeping an account of the contents were laid down in the ancient 'Statuta'.¹ The annual audit was held 'within 8 days of the feast of St Dionysius' (9 October) and at this an indenture was drawn up between the outgoing and incoming officers, enumerating the contents of the Chest. The outgoing proctors kept one half as their acquittance and the other was deposited in the Chest. All the earlier indentures have perished except that of 1363, which survives by a fortunate piece of misplacing.² In that year the Chest contained: money to the value of £32. 12s. 3¼d. with notes of other small sums owed, an alabaster cup placed as a pledge, four books of canon law and one of the 'Sentences',³ a set of Mass vestments with a cope, a white vestment, and a dozen silk cloths; finally the charters, which begin with the item '33 royal

¹ 'Statuta Antiqua'. Printed in *Documents relating to the University and Colleges of Cambridge* (London, 1852), vol. 1, pp. 295 ff., particularly nos. 58, 181-3 and 188.

² Transcribed and printed in Introduction to Grace Book Γ, p. x (plate 9).

³ 'Sententiarum libri quatuor', by the 12th century Peter Lombard.

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charters and 2 letters patent'. Some of these charters remain to this day but many have disappeared.

The university owned from the fourteenth century, in addition to the Common Chest, certain 'charitable' chests, which had been endowed by benefactors for making loans to poor students or for providing chaplains and chantries for the keeping of obits. One of these, the Neel Chest, incorporates in its foundation deed (1344) an elaborate set of statutes modelled on the arrangements for the keeping of the Common Chest;¹ and there is reason for thinking that the Neel Chest and perhaps others were kept with the Common Chest in the university treasury. Neither the university of Oxford nor that of Cambridge possessed at this time stone buildings suitable for the safe keeping of treasure, and both made use of the university church. At Oxford the treasury from about 1320 was in the Old Congregation House of St Mary the Virgin,² and at Cambridge in the tower of Great St Mary's.

It was to Great St Mary's that the rioters came in June 1381, during the disturbances in which the university archives played a prominent but unfortunate part. The story of the bonfire on Market Hill, in which so many of the early muniments perished at the hands of the townsmen, is familiar to us from the picturesque account in Cooper's *Annals*.³ Perhaps less well known is the following extract from a memorandum in the Parliament Rolls. Here the place in which the Common Chest was kept is explicitly referred to as 'Le Tresorie'.⁴

Fait a remembrer qe grantz pleintes et clamour estoient faitz en ceste Parlement des Mair Baillifs et la Comminaltee de la Ville de Canteburgh, de ce qe en temps del rumour et levee de malurez gentz ils avec plusours autres malfaisours de lours assent et covine en oultrageouses multitudes qi estoient venuz a lour envoie a la dite Ville de Canteburgh lesqueux entre autres lours malfaites debriserent le Tresorie de l'Universitee illoques et les Privileges et Chartres des Rois, Bulles del Pape, et autres Munimentz del dite Universite arderent. . .

Et adonques le dit Esmon nadgairs Mair illoques present respondist et dist. . . Q'il ne fust unqes assentant aidant ne conseillant au dit malfait. . . ne rien unqes y fist ne deist qe y purroit eschere en damage ou deshonneur de la dite Universitee sinoun soulement par cohercion et oultrageouse compulsion dautres.⁵

¹ Document no. 35 (Luard's list). Printed and described by J. W. Clark, *Camb. Ant. Soc. Proc.* vol. XI (O.S.), no. XLV, pp. 82-95.

² Reginald L. Poole, *A Lecture on the History of the University Archives* [Oxford], (Oxford, 1912), p. 7.

³ C. H. Cooper, *Annals of Cambridge* (Cambridge, 1842), vol. I, pp. 120-1 (for 1381).

⁴ *Rot. Parl.* 5^o Ric. II, pt. I, m. 9. Printed in 'Rotuli Parliamentorum', vol. III, pp. 106-7.

⁵ 'It is to be remembered that great complaints and clamour were made in this Parliament against the Mayor, Bailiffs and Commonalty of the Town of Cambridge, for the fact that, in a time of unrest and uprising of

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Although this catastrophe undoubtedly sadly depleted the charters of the university, a certain number escaped the fury of the rioters. About forty such for the period 1266–1381 are recorded in fifteenth-century lists. Further royal charters, confirming privileges and conferring new ones, were soon added to this nucleus, so that their number was almost doubled in the next four decades. With this recovery, the university found a new and safer place for its treasury.

In the last decade of the fourteenth century Sir William Thorpe, brother of the lord chancellor, and the Lady Grace, his wife, devoted themselves to the building of the new Divinity Schools, which the university had begun to erect on land received from the bequest of Nigel de Thornton. Two earlier attempts had been made to finish the work in 1359 and 1365 but had been brought to a standstill from lack of funds. Sir William Thorpe now revived the project, and in 1400 brought the building to its completion, largely as it stands today. Below was the Divinity School, above a chapel, generally called the ‘New Chapel’, which could be used both for ordinary assemblies of the university and for the commemoration of benefactors. In return for their munificence, Sir William and Lady Grace were to benefit from this latter use. In 1398 the university under its chancellor, Eudo de la Zouche, covenanted to pray for them while they lived, and celebrate their exequies after their death. Further, every graduate on his admission was required to say a ‘De profundis’ for them. This covenant was embodied in the statutes,¹ and referring to it Archbishop Parker says: ‘For which Convention, the Executors of William Thorpe went forward with the Divinity Scholes, . . . making from the ground the Porch, with the foundation, and the volte as it standeth at this day, where the University Hutch is.’²

seditionous people, they, with many other like-minded evildoers of whom they approved, who had come in enormous multitudes at their summons to the said Town of Cambridge, among their other misdeeds broke open the Treasury of the University there, and burned the Privileges and Charters of the Kings, the Bulls of the Pope and other Muniments of the said University’ . . .

‘Whereupon the said Edmund, lately Mayor, being there present, replied and said, . . . that he had never agreed to, helped nor advised the said misdeed . . . and that he neither did nor said anything there which might have resulted in damage or dishonour to the said University, save solely on the coercion and violent compulsion by others.’

¹ ‘Statuta Antiqua’ no. 184. Printed in *Documents relating . . .*, vol. 1, p. 411.

² MS. 118, no. 6, in Corpus Christi College (C.C.C.). Printed in H. P. Stokes, *The Chaplains and the Chapel of the University of Cambridge*, Cambridge Antiquarian Society 8° publication, no. xli, pp. 21, 49 and 51. See also Robert Willis and John Willis Clark, *The Architectural History of the University of Cambridge* (Cambridge, 1886), vol. III, p. 11.

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This 'little volte' was the second home of the University Chest. It seems to have been a smaller chapel or vestry built over the staircase leading up to the New Chapel (now generally known as the Regent House). The doorway by which it was entered from the New Chapel is still visible, but it and the staircase were removed during alterations to the Old Schools in the seventeenth century. Of its appearance, therefore, little is known except that it had a window, as appears from an entry in the Proctors' Accounts of 1518: 'pro vitriacione cujusdam fenestre in parvo sacello in scholis . . . vj^d'. The keys of the room, according to Parker, were to be in the custody of the vice-chancellor.

At what date this room became the university treasury is not known. It must have been before 1458, when an entry in Grace Book A refers to the room as 'capella ciste communis', though its more usual title at this time was 'parva capella' (as in Statute 63 which speaks of 'nova capella et parva capella eidem annexa'). By 1513 the room was 'Ye Unversyte Chapell vestrary' and later simply 'the Vestry'. There seems no reason why the Chest should not have been moved across from Great St Mary's soon after the completion of the new building, as the presence of a permanent 'Keeper of the Schools' there made it safer than the church had been. It seems likely that the Chest was in the vestry by 1420, when a certain Master William Rysley compiled a very detailed inventory of the contents of the Chest; for on the last leaf of this inventory is the 'Registrum vestimentorum et aliorum ornamentorum ad novam capellam universitatis Cantebrie pertinencium'. The register of vestments is not in Rysley's hand but in one similar to that of the writer of the Library List of 1424 which follows it in the volume as made up.¹ All these lists were subsequently bound up into the 'Registrum Librorum, Scriptorum, aliorumque bonorum Universitatis', compiled by the proctors in 1473 and preserved in this form in the university archives.

Rysley's inventory of 1420 deserves more detailed description, since, in listing the contents of the Chest, it incidentally becomes the first catalogue of the archives. It is written on four parchment sheets of indifferent quality, with holes and snags, folded to form a gathering of eight leaves. Of these, the first five are ruled for the inventory proper, the fifth is mutilated, the sixth and seventh left blank, except for the register of vestments on fo. 7b, and the eighth is cut away.

The inventory is headed: 'Inventarium bonorum mobilium ad cistam com-

¹ Transcribed by H. Bradshaw, *Camb. Ant. Soc. Proc.* vol. II (O.S.), no. XXII, pp. 242-57.

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munem universitatis Cantebrigg pertinencium sub anno domini millesimo cccc° xx° et Henrici quinti viii per magistrum Willelmum Rysley compilatum.’¹

First the valuables are listed: the university seal of silver, and three purses; the ‘common purse’, a purse of Master Robert Tey containing £6, and a purse of rents from the university lands and the new School of Civil Law. Then come the muniments, roughly classified and kept in smaller bags or boxes marked A–N, and within these boxes the documents bear individual letters, a, b, c. Boxes A–D are entitled ‘Indulta Regum’ and contain charters from Henry III to Henry V, seventy in all; box F has sixteen ‘Indulta et Epistole summorum Pontificum’; and box G, ‘Composiciones et concordie Universitatem tangentes cum aliis’, twenty-three in number. Boxes H and I are devoted to muniments connected with the early benefactors, Nigel de Thornton and Roger Heedon. Rysley did not complete the inventory of the last five boxes. For box K he entered eight indentures and leases of property, and for box L two commissions. Box M is headed, ‘Obligaciones et acquietancie’ but nothing is listed. Box N has six ‘Bille cum aliis memorabilibus’. Below this is a pointing finger in the margin and two notes: ‘Item memorandum quod Johannes Aylmer contulit universitati unum ciphum argenteum cum coopertorio cum iii angulis in pede ponderis i lb vii unc’ et v peny weght et hoc ad usum cancellarii qui pro tempore fuerit. Magister Willelmus Rysley istud inventarium compilavit et manu propria scripsit. Anno domini m^{mo} cccc^{mo} xx°.’

Rysley’s inventory at once became the standard list by which the muniments were checked. From at least 1431, the writers of the Proctors’ Indentures, accounting for the contents of the Chest, avoided the necessity of enumerating the earlier charters by the convenient formula ‘Item munimenta que continentur in registro compilato per M. Rysley usque ad M. literam . . .’, and then made any additions or corrections.

From these indentures, and indeed from the earlier indentures of 1363, we find that the University Chest contained, besides valuables and muniments, notes of debts, and also pledges for loans or debts, generally termed ‘cautions’. During the fifteenth century, the increasing bulk of the archives and the increased numbers of pledges made it necessary to provide a separate chest for these cautions. A statute was accordingly made in June 1456 authorising the provision of a chest

¹ *Registrum Librorum*, fo. 9a (plate 2).

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of three keys, to be kept by the vice-chancellor and the proctors, for the safe keeping of the cautions, 'since many of them are not in money but consist of books or other things'.¹ At a later date, some of the archives themselves had to be moved from the Common Chest to another, generally called the 'Chest of Evidences'. In 1487 the Grace Book has an entry, 'Item pro uno [sic] clavi ad cistam evidenciarum . . . viij^d'.² Both these chests were kept with the Common Chest in the vestry.

Although the archives were being added to in every decade, Rysley's inventory remained the only catalogue for two centuries after it was written. Until about 1500, it was corrected and kept up to date by various writers. The latest and most thorough of these revisions is made in a hand identical with that of the Senior Proctor's Account of 1494–5 in Grace Book B. The senior proctor in that year was John Fisher and the hand is believed to be his. Fisher, if indeed it was he, evidently made a very careful check of the whole of the contents of the Chest and against several sections wrote 'non reperiuntur' in the margin. As well as adding new documents he prefaced the inventory with a short instruction on how to find individual documents: 'Quisquis ad cistam hanc accedis quippiam quesiturus perlege primum istum indicem in quo ubi reperieris rem tuam; deprehendes duplicem litteram alteram capitalem alteram minorem. Capitalis littera docebit pixidem, minor vero locum pixidis iuxta litterarum ordinem.'

Whether much use was made of the revised catalogue is doubtful, for after this all additional entries cease. In the new century were to come administrative and other changes which would rapidly render obsolete many of the medieval muniments of the university.

2. THE REGISTERS

The sixteenth century opened in the universities with a burst of administrative activity and of reform in the keeping of administrative records. A second period of expansion took place between 1540 and 1550. As a result, there arose the third great group of university documents (after the charters and deeds of property), the 'registers', and with them a new officer whose duty it was to keep them, the registry. Similar developments took place in Oxford, some slightly before,

¹ 'Statuta Antiqua' no. 59. Printed in Documents relating . . . , vol. 1, p. 343.

² *Grace Book A*, p. 219 (fo. 149b).

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some slightly after, their Cambridge equivalents, so that in this matter at least Cambridge was not merely following the lead of the senior university.

At Cambridge, the year 1501 is the starting-point for the changes, and perhaps it is not a coincidence that John Fisher became vice-chancellor in that year. Certainly he was a skilled administrator and had personal knowledge of the keeping of university records from his proctorship. Up to this time there had been only one series of registers, the 'Registra Procuratorum', kept by each pair of proctors during their year of office. Although primarily financial records, these 'Registra' had contained a considerable amount of other matter, Graces for degrees, the 'Ordo Senioritatis', and acts of the senate. In 1501 it was decided that the 'Registra' should be confined to matters financial, while the Graces of the senate, the Ordo and similar acts should be entered in a new book. Thus was inaugurated the series of Grace Books proper.¹ Another reform of this year concerned the keeping of a Register of Wills proved in the chancellor's court, and the first extant book of copies of wills begins in 1501.

The question then arises, who kept these registers? The curious thing is that five years elapse before their keeping is made the subject of university legislation. In Grace Book Γ there is an entry, for the year 1506, 'Item conceditur magistro Robarto Hobbys bedello artium ut sit regestrarius universitatis', together with a Grace that on account of his office he shall be excused attendance at exequies and masses 'salva regencia sua'.² Hobbys had been a fellow of King's College, held the degree of M.A. and had been made bedell of arts the previous year. As the entries in the Grace Book are in his hand from the year of his bedellship, it may be that from its inception the Grace Book had been kept by one of the esquire bedells. The hands of the earlier entries do not change annually as in the Proctors' Register. More cannot be proved, as we have no examples of the hands of earlier bedells with which to make comparisons. What is certain is that the office of registry continued to be given to one of the bedells until the seventeenth century.

Little more is known of Hobbys' activities as registry. In 1507 he was allowed by Grace to remain covered in congregations 'propter egritudinem quam habet in capite',³ but it cannot have been a serious complaint, for while he resigned the office of bedell in 1529, he retained that of registry until 1542-3, when he made

¹ See chapter 5, on Grace Books.

² *Grace Book* Γ, p. 51 (fo. 31a).

³ *Ibid.* p. 63 (fo. 37a).

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his last entry in the Grace Book, recording his retirement and the appointment of John Mere.¹

John Mere, like his predecessor, was an M.A. and had been a fellow of King's. He had been bedell of divinity since July 1530. He resigned the bedellship in 1557 but remained registry until his death in 1558. As registry, Mere has left us evidence of his care and diligence in office, and the entries in the new Grace Book² he began are regularly made in a neat, splayed hand. In his hand also is a fragment of the 'Acta Curiae' for the year 1552, showing that it now fell to the registry to keep the ordinary judicial records,³ as well as the Books of Wills. From the statute of 1544,⁴ which initiated the system of university matriculation, the Registry kept the Matriculation Register. All this was in addition to his work as esquire bedell, work which took him to London at times on university business, for we have two bills of his expenses in the years 1548 and 1554, the latter signed. He was the author of three diaries, one of which (that for the year 1533-4) is written on blank pages of Grace Book A.⁵ It is significant that he had custody of this register while he was a bedell only.

While he was in office, Mere evidently compiled notes relating to university privileges and procedure, for, according to his will, his executors were to 'gyve to the Registers offyce of thuniversytie as wel those bokes that I bought as those that I have made myself concernyng that offyce, so that they remayn perpetually to the offyce'. Corpus Christi College has preserved the record of this transaction, a bill between Mere's executors and his successor in office, which enumerates the registers in detail. Most of them can be identified with existing volumes.⁶

The registers were not Mere's only gift to the university. The house he bequeathed became for many years the home of the Lady Margaret Professor, and its title deeds remain in the university archives (*see also* chap. 8). As well as this benefaction of 'my holl house wherein I do nowe dwel', Mere left 'the reversion and

¹ *Grace Book* Γ, p. 369 (fo. 177b).

² *Grace Book* Δ.

³ See chapter 11, on 'University Jurisdiction'.

⁴ Statute of 11 May 1544. *Statuta Academiae Cantabrigiensis* (ed. of 1785), p. 122.

⁵ *Grace Book* A, pp. 221-30 (fos. 52a-55b). The other diaries are edited by John Lamb, *A Collection of Letters, Statutes and other Documents from the Manuscript Library of Corpus Christi College* (London, 1838), pp. 184-236.

⁶ MS. 106, no. 346 in Corpus Christi College. Transcripts in Cambridge University Registry guard-book (henceforward referred to as C.U.R.) 20.1 (Registry), no. 3 (*2) and documents relating to the probate of Mere's will in 'Exhibita' files. See Appendix A for a description of the guard-books.

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yeres remayngynge in my lease of the house and gardens over the waye agaynst my sayd house provided that my father for the tyme of his dwelling in Cambridge may have a competent chamber in the house aforsayd with a bed fornyshed in the same for his use. . . also I gyve to Mr Vice-Chancellor a gold ryng to the value of xs.’ In 1559 Mere’s executors founded the sermon still observed as ‘Mere’s Commemoration’ and he is, of course, remembered among the university benefactors. He was buried, according to his own wish, ‘in the churchyard of St Bene’t’s next to my late wyfe deceased whose sowle God pardon’. The tombstone can still be identified, but the present inscription is of a later date.

The work so well begun by Hobbys and Mere was continued by the third registry, Matthew Stokys, bedell of divinity and notary public. Stokys was elected in 1558 at a critical time for the university when religious and social changes had wrought havoc with ancient practice and administration. He saw the university jurisdiction, which had been principally ecclesiastical, become more secular, and the promulgation of the new statutes of 1570, which were to form the basis of university administration for the next three centuries. Fortunately, Stokys seems to have been a model registry, preserving the old and adapting himself to the new. Fuller says of him:

A register [he was] indeed, both by his place and painful performance therein; for he (as the Poets fain of Janus with two faces) saw two worlds, that before and after the Reformation; in which juncture of time, so great the confusion and embezzling of records, that, had not Master Stokes been the more careful, I believe, that though Cambridge would not be so oblivious as Massala Corvinus, who forgot his own name, yet would she have forgotten the names of all her ancient officers.¹

The book which he compiled on the ancient officers and practices of the university is still in the university archives and one of its greatest treasures.² Stokys was also responsible for the re-designing of the common seal of the university in its present form, and for a curious diagram depicting the duties of the clerks of the market. This and his coat of arms still hang in the registry.

The new statutes of 1570, and the industry of the registry, meant a great increase in the numbers of the university records. The court records alone were beginning to assume unwieldy proportions. Probably spurred on by the energetic

¹ Thomas Fuller, *The History of the Worthies of England* (Nuttall’s edn., 3 vols., London, 1840), vol. 1, p. 206.

² ‘Stokys’ Book’, fos. 89b–113a. Transcripts of portions of Stokys’ Book in Appendix A of G. Peacock, *Observations on the Statutes of the University of Cambridge* (London and Cambridge, 1841).

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registrary, the university provided the first permanent home of the registry office. In 1571–2 the east side of the Schools' quadrangle, which had originally contained two small schools, was converted for the use of the vice-chancellor's court and the registrary. The account runs:

Item to Matthewe Stokys Bedell, to glase and to make thowse on the sowthe syde of the scoole gatys a consistorie for the Vice-Chauncelours and an office for ye Regester to kepe the bokes and recordys of thuniversitie in . . . ixⁱⁱ ix^s.¹

The use of the term 'register' for the office was general at this date and persisted at least to the mid-seventeenth century, when the civil 'registers' for births and deaths were created under the Commonwealth. With regard to the duties of the 'university register', inscribed in the fly-leaf of Grace Book B is a short poem:

Who deue wilbe a Register
shulde holde his pen in truthe entyere
Ensearch he ought recordes of olde
the dowte to trye; the right to holde
The lawes to know he must co[n]tende
Olde customys eke: he shulde expende
No paynes to wright he maye refuse
His offyce ellys: he dothe abuse.

In the first half of the seventeenth century, the registry, the 'State Paper Office' of the university, continued to expand. Indeed, under the energetic and respected James Tabor, registry from 1600 to 1645, the registry office may be said to have been in its hey-day, and the registrary himself an increasingly important person in the affairs of the university.

With Tabor, the office of registry was finally dissociated from that of esquire bedell. Some of the earlier registraries had perhaps anticipated this development by retaining office after they had resigned their bedellship (presumably because the duties of the latter office were more onerous to the aged or infirm), but, until Tabor's appointment, every new registrary had been one of the esquire bedells. Tabor himself, however, M.A. of Corpus Christi College and a notary public, held no other position than that of Clerk to the Commissioners of Sewers. He kept the records assiduously, particularly the court records, and we have more miscellaneous bills, receipts, warrants, and memoranda preserved from his period

¹ University Audit Book, 1545–1659, fo. 123b. Willis and Clark, *Architectural History*, vol. III, p. 22.