

The Byconyll Exhibitions at Oxford 1502–1664

By NICHOLAS ORME

SUMMARY

In 1501 Sir John Byconyll, a Somerset knight, endowed ten exhibitions for Somerset scholars at Oxford University under the control of the abbot of Glastonbury and accommodated, by the 1540s, in Hart Hall. When the abbey was dissolved in 1539, the appointment of scholars passed to the chief officers of the royal exchequer and the exhibitions ceased to be confined to Somerset men; the link with Hart Hall was also broken in 1572. Nevertheless, the exhibitions (reduced to five in 1585) continued to be granted to university scholars (generally members of colleges), and in 1654 they were reunited with Hart Hall, an arrangement confirmed in 1664. The article concludes with a list of 72 known holders of the exhibitions between 1546 and 1633.

One of the best-known developments in the English universities during the early 16th century is the consolidation of the college system. New foundations with elaborate buildings, paid lecturers, substantial libraries and numerous undergraduates brought the universities, we now think, into their long-lasting collegiate era. Yet history is rarely simple, and the university exhibitions with which this article deals did not accord with that process. Founded in 1502, they were based at a hall not a college, and administered by a monastery which was to disappear within forty years. Nor was their founder an insignificant man but a Somerset knight, Sir John Byconyll, whose brother was an Oxford D.C.L. and who rose himself to become a prominent member of the west-country gentry during the second half of the 15th century.¹ M.P. for Shaftesbury (1455), Somerset (1472–5) and Dorset (1491–2), he was escheator of Devon (1456–7), sheriff of Somerset and Dorset (1472), and regularly appointed as a J.P. from 1454 to 1494. He was a soldier who was knighted by Henry VII on Bosworth Field itself, showing that he was actively committed to Henry's cause. He was also a prominent patron of religion, associated with several religious houses and with chantry projects at Dorchester, Wells and Yeovil. Only in founding a dynasty was he unsuccessful, for although he married twice, he had no surviving children by either wife.

Many wealthy childless people like Sir John sought to perpetuate their names, in default of descendants, through a charitable benefaction, but it is rarely possible to guess why they chose one good work (in this case, education) rather than another. True, Sir John's elder brother William Byconyll (d. 1448), the Oxford D.C.L., was a protégé of

¹ For biographies of Byconyll, see A.S. Bicknell, 'A Forgotten Chancellor and Canon', *Proc. Somerset Arch. and Nat. Hist. Soc.* xl (1894), pp.208–26, and J.C. Wedgwood and Anne D. Holt, *Hist. Parliament: Biographies of the Members of the Commons House, 1439–1509* (1936), pp.74–5.

Archbishop Chichele and a small donor to Chichele's college of All Souls,² but many gentry families had graduate members and Sir John's exhibitions did not become linked with All Souls. His interest in education is first manifest in connection with the Franciscan friars, and may have been encouraged by members of that order. In 1485 he gave a substantial benefaction to the Franciscans of Dorchester (Dorset) by building them watermills on the River Frome near the friary to provide revenues for their support. The friars in return recognised him as a founder of their house, promised to pray for him regularly and undertook that part of the income from his endowment should always be employed in 'the bringing of boys into the [Franciscan] order and their education in good manners and learning, and in making good the books in the choir'.³ The document, which also mentions the cursors or readers teaching scholars in the friary, is unusual in its concern with education. By 1490 Sir John was known at Oxford too as a potential donor of money. He was one of those to whom the university wrote in that year asking for help to repair its church, St Mary the Virgin,⁴ and by 1501, if not before, his charitable plans had settled on a permanent university benefaction.

On 13 August 1501, ten days before his death, Sir John caused a codicil to be added to his will, disposing of his real property after his death.⁵ Most of his lands were in the hands of feoffees, who were ordered to pay the revenues to his second wife Elizabeth until she died or remarried. In return, she was required to maintain five scholars at Oxford 'to lerne the law dyvnye for techynge Christian people', i.e. studying theology. Each scholar was to receive four marks a year (£2 13s. 4d.) or five (£3 6s. 8d.) if four were not enough. A separate group of lands was to be transferred to endow a daily mass for Sir John's soul, and a third group to support an unspecified number of scholars at Oxford, each receiving four marks a year and studying divinity in the words already stated. These latter scholars were to be appointed by the head of whichever religious house Sir John was buried in, and the head was to 'assign them in' (presumably, choose them from) North Perrott, South Perrott and the knight's other lands in Somerset. Channelling benefits to places with which a founder had personal connections was common in schemes of this kind, notably in William Wykeham's statutes for Winchester and New Colleges. Sir John's lack of precision about his place of burial seems to reflect some vacillation of purpose. His widow's will of 1504 speaks of a chapel at Glastonbury Abbey 'late built by my husband and myself', implying that he had planned their interment there.⁶ However, as a founder of the Dorchester friary, he may have come under pressure to be buried in its church, or his relations with Glastonbury may have undergone some strain. He may have wished to warn the abbey not to take his patronage for granted.

In the event, when Sir John died on 23 August 1501, he was buried at Glastonbury in a small chapel leading off the south side of the choir of the Lady chapel.⁷ The abbot of Glastonbury therefore became the person responsible for appointing the Byconyll

² For William, see A.B. Emden, *Biographical Reg. of the University of Oxford to A.D. 1500* (3 vols. 1957-9), i, 330, and for his will, Bicknell op.cit. note 1, pp.198-208.

³ W. Dugdale, *Monasticon Anglicanum*, ed. J. Caley and others (London, 1817-30), vi part iii, 1510-11; *Victoria County History of Dorset*, ii, 94.

⁴ *Epistolae Academicæ Oxon.* ed. H. Anstey, ii (Oxf. Hist. Soc. xxxvi), p.574. Two sets of initials I.B. on the Divinity School vault at Oxford, built in the second half of the 15th century, may also refer to him: *Inventory of Hist. Mons. in the City of Oxford* (Royal Comm. Hist. Mons. (England), 1939), p.6.

⁵ Bicknell op. cit. note 1, pp.217-20; *Somerset Medieval Wills, 1501-30*, ed. F.W. Weaver (Somerset Rec. Soc. xix), pp.7-9.

⁶ *Somerset Wills*, pp.72, 74.

⁷ J. Leland, *Itinerary*, ed. Lucy Toulmin Smith (5 vols. 1907-10), i, 289.

university exhibitors. Not long afterwards, on 21 February 1502, Sir Giles Daubeney and ten others of Byconyll's feoffees received a royal licence to grant the manors of Cameley, Lyde (in Yeovil) and Nunney, all in Somerset, with the advowson of Nunney church and other lesser property, to the abbot of Glastonbury. The lands were said to be worth £52 a year.⁸ Elizabeth Byconyll died on 30 June 1504, having affirmed that 'I have truly performed my late husband's will as well in amortising the lands to the abbot of Glastonbury as in everything else'.⁹ She was buried by her husband's side. There was nothing odd about a monk administering a scheme for educating lay people. Elsewhere in the west of England, three endowed grammar schools at Bruton (1520), Winchcombe (1521) and Bradford-on-Avon (1524) were put under the control of monasteries,¹⁰ and Glastonbury had a long-standing link with the university of Oxford through sending student monks to Gloucester College there.¹¹ Other great monasteries – Christ Church (Canterbury) and Durham – had been responsible for sending lay students to Oxford since the late 14th century.¹² Exactly when the abbot of Glastonbury started appointing and paying the Byconyll exhibitors is not clear, but the scheme was certainly in operation by 1535 when the 'Valor Ecclesiasticus' records that the abbey held the manor of Cameley 'by donation of John Byconell, knight, for certain uses as expressed below'. The income was just over £51, of which £7 was assigned to pay for a chantry priest praying for Sir John's soul and £33 6s. 8d. 'for the exhibition of ten scholars studying at Oxford in perpetuity, viz. to each of them £3 6s. 8d.'. ¹³

Unfortunately, we have no other information about the abbey's involvement. Its Tudor records have largely disappeared, save for a few account rolls from the final years of the monastery – none of which mentions the scholars. A single surviving account of the Cameley, Lyde and Nunney property in 1535–6 relates to income alone, not to expenditure.¹⁴ Not until after the dissolution of the abbey in September 1539 are more details forthcoming. Four months later, on 23 January 1540, the university of Oxford (perhaps incited by the Byconyll scholars, deprived of their income) wrote to Thomas Cromwell asking him to safeguard the exhibitions.¹⁵ An order to this effect was evidently forthcoming from the Crown, and from Michaelmas 1546, if not before, regular payments were made by the receiver-general of Crown lands in Somerset, and noted in his accounts. Translated from Latin, the annual entry reads: 'Exhibition of scholars studying in the university of Oxford, conceded by the former monastery of Glastonbury. And in money paid to ten scholars living in the university of Oxford in a certain house called Hart Hall.' Ten scholars are then listed by name, with identical sums of £3 6s. 8d. paid to each of them.¹⁶ It looks as if the location of the scholars in Hart Hall preceded the dissolution of the monastery, for the hall would have been an appropriate place for them from the abbot's point of view. Hart Hall belonged to Exeter College, and both places had long

⁸ *Cal. Patent Rolls, 1494–1502*, p.275.

⁹ *Somerset Wills*, ed. Weaver, p.72.

¹⁰ N. Orme, *Education in the West of England, 1066–1548* (1976), pp.116, 120–1, 188.

¹¹ N. Orme, 'Glastonbury Abbey and Education', *The Archaeology and History of Glastonbury Abbey*, ed. J. Carley (forthcoming).

¹² W.A. Pantin, *Canterbury College, Oxford*, iv (Oxf. Hist. Soc. n.s. xxx), pp.85–9; R.B. Dobson, *Durham Priory, 1400–1450* (1973), p.348.

¹³ *Valor Ecclesiasticus temp. Hen. VIII* (Record Comm. 1810–24), i, 145.

¹⁴ P.R.O., SC6 Henry VIII/3111.

¹⁵ Anthony Wood, *Hist. and Antiqs. of the Colleges and Halls in the Univ. of Oxf.* ed. J. Gutch (Oxford, 1786), pp.642–3, quoting 'the state papers at Whitehall'.

¹⁶ P.R.O., LR 6/104/1.

specialised in receiving scholars from the west of England. We do not know if the abbot of Glastonbury limited his choice of scholars to Sir John Byconyll's former estates – he may have selected them more widely – but most of them probably came from Somerset or the nearby counties.¹⁷ Not being obliged or eligible to be members of colleges, they naturally gravitated to the west-of-England hall, where the abbot could send the money due to them in a single sum.

Of the ten scholars named in the receiver-general's account of Michaelmas 1546–7, six appear to have been appointed by the last abbot of Glastonbury, Richard Whiting, before the dissolution. Walter Were, the most senior, came up to the university in about 1529, Walter Colmer in about 1532, Robert Pawlet in about 1535, and Ralph Hunt, William Radbert and John Wetecombe in about 1536.¹⁸ At least three of these had some west-country connections. Colmer's surname is that of a former prior of Glastonbury and of the bailiff of the Byconyll property in 1535.¹⁹ Radbert subsequently held benefices in Somerset, while Wetecombe went on to be a fellow of Exeter College and held a parish in Devon. All of them graduated as B.A. or M.A. and Were as B.Med., but none as a B.D. or D.D., suggesting that Byconyll's stipulation about studying divinity was not adhered to in a strict sense, although three of the six later became parish clergy. At first, the scholars tended to hold their exhibitions for long periods: seven of them from at least 1546 to 1559. There was a single departure in about 1550 and two more in 1555, the latter not being replaced. In 1559, however, for reasons which are not clear, all the eight incumbent exhibitioners lost their emoluments and ten fresh scholars were appointed. This involved a change of policy as well as personnel, since the newcomers had hardly any connection with the west of England. One indeed was Philip Randall, sometime fellow of Exeter College and principal of Hart Hall from 1550 to 1598, whose exhibition was perhaps a recompense for doling out the others, but his colleagues who seem to have included Jasper Heywood, the future Jesuit poet and translator, came from various places in England and this continued to be so down to the 1630s. We meet the occasional scholar with a Somerset connection, but such people occur by chance. After 1559 the exhibitions were awarded to men from anywhere in England.

No doubt this reflected a change in patronage, as the responsibility for administering the exhibitions passed from the abbey to the Crown. We are not told explicitly who made the awards after 1539, but the right was probably taken over by the officers of the royal exchequer who had overall charge of the payments. During the 1560s, as we shall see, the patronage seems to have belonged to the lord treasurer, William Paulet, marquess of Winchester (d. 1572). In 1585 the treasurer's deputy, Sir Walter Mildmay, chancellor of the exchequer, secured half of the exhibitions for his foundation of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, and in 1588 there is a casual reference in the accounts to the grant of an exhibition 'by order of the chancellor', possibly the same officer.²⁰ Later still, in 1664, the right was formally claimed for the treasurer or the chancellor of the exchequer.²¹ The receiver-general's accounts always state, down to the 1630s, that the scholars are based in Hart Hall, but their biographies show that most of them belonged to colleges after 1561

¹⁷ See below, notes 18–19.

¹⁸ A.B. Emden, *Biog. Reg. of the Univ. of Oxf. A.D. 1501 to 1540* (1974), pp.132, 305, 437, 472, 615, 620. I have reckoned back their starting dates from the periods of study claimed in their degree supplications (Oxf. Univ. Archives, Regs. of Congregation, H, f.274v., I, ff.32v., 42v.).

¹⁹ *Regs. of Thos. Wolsey &c.* ed. H.C. Maxwell-Lyte (Somerset Rec. Soc. lv), p.84; *Valor Ecclesiasticus*, i, 145.

²⁰ P.R.O., LR 6/18/11.

²¹ Bodl. MS. Wood F. 28, f.256.

and it is probably unwise to assume their hall connection without further evidence. While Winchester was treasurer there was still something of a link with the hall through the grant of an exhibition to the principal, but this arrangement stopped when the marquess died in 1572 and it was never resumed. Moreover, nine of the scholars listed as holding exhibitions between 1559 and 1633 do not appear in the matriculation or degree registers of either Oxford or Cambridge, and it is possible that some were schoolboys or others who did not actually study at Oxford, though the vast majority continued to do so.

In 1579, the exhibitions became an issue in university affairs. It appears that convocation at Oxford complained to the university chancellor, the earl of Leicester, that the exhibitions had not been paid since 1572 when the marquess died, and on 23 February convocation received a letter from Leicester suggesting that it should send representatives to the present marquess, grandson of the lord treasurer, to ask why the payments had ceased.²² The chancellor and the university knew that the exhibitions had originated from Glastonbury Abbey and had been continued by Henry VIII and his successors, but they were wrong about other points. They thought that there were twelve scholars not ten and that Paulet had assumed the duty of paying them in return for buying the endowments from the Crown. In fact, although Paulet bought a good deal of Crown property in Somerset in 1561,²³ he did not buy the Byconyll endowment and his patronage of the exhibitions came to him solely through his office of treasurer. As for the payments ceasing, the receiver-general's accounts show that, on the contrary, they were regularly paid after 1572. The misunderstanding probably arose because in that year, after the marquess died, nine of the ten incumbent scholars were replaced by others, perhaps on the initiative of the new lord treasurer, Lord Burghley, and one of those to lose his exhibition was Philip Randall, principal of Hart Hall. The new scholars must have been appointed privately, without reference to the hall, so that their link with the endowment was not clear. So although, on 23 February, convocation appointed Randall and one of the university proctors to take Leicester's letter to the marquess of Winchester, nothing profitable can have come from the meeting and on the following 23 May the university wrote again to Leicester asking for his help in the matter of 'certain exhibitions'.²⁴ No doubt in due course the real situation was revealed. The treasurer or chancellor of the exchequer continued to appoint the scholars, but the connection with Hart Hall was not re-established.

Such historians who have traced the history of the Byconyll exhibitions – Brian Twyne in 1608, Anthony Wood later in the century, S.G. Hamilton in 1903 and Freda K. Jones in 1964 – have concentrated on the loss of this connection.²⁵ It therefore needs to be emphasised that the exhibitions continued to be awarded without the link and with one major modification. On 19 February 1585 a new arrangement was made by the crown, at the request of Mildmay, by which five exhibitions were transferred to Emmanuel College leaving five in Oxford,²⁶ and only the latter payments subsequently appear in the yearly accounts. The series of accounts in which the scholars are named does not survive after 1633, but there is a mention of the exhibitions in 1635 in another series²⁷ and they may

²² Oxf. Univ. Archives, Reg. of Congregation, KK, f.270.

²³ *Cal. Patent Rolls, 1560-63*, pp.49-50.

²⁴ Oxf. Univ. Archives, Reg. KK, f.281v.

²⁵ B. Twyne, *Antiquitatis Academiae Oxoniensis Apologia* (Oxford, 1606), 'Miscellanea de Aulis'; Wood, *Colleges and Halls*, pp.642-3; S.G. Hamilton, *Hertford College* (1903), pp.10-11; *V.C.H. Oxon.* iii, 310.

²⁶ P.R.O., LR 6/18/7.

²⁷ P.R.O., LR 7/46/25.

have been paid until 23 March 1652 when the Commonwealth 'Committee for the Removal of Obstructions to the Sale of Lands' sold part of the fee-farm rent of the Crown in Somerset to John Gutch and Henry Mabson of Glastonbury and transferred to them the duty of paying the exhibitions.²⁸ The new owners disregarded this condition, but they were forced to observe it through an accident. In 1653 a gentleman from Somerset who was searching the records in the Pipe Office at London discovered a record of the exhibitions (probably in the receiver-general's accounts) mentioning Glastonbury Abbey and Hart Hall, and told a friend of his from the Glastonbury area with a son, George Day, whom he wished to send to Oxford.²⁹ Day senior went up to London, got a transcript of the sale of 1652 and showed it to Philip Stephens, the principal of Hart Hall, who had no knowledge of the exhibitions. Stephens treated with Gutch and got him to pay the money 'with much ado' from Lady Day 1654 to Lady Day 1659, after which the payment was withheld. Meanwhile, George Day went up to Hart Hall as an undergraduate in 1655.

After 1659 there was another hiatus, due first to Gutch's refusal to pay and then to the resumption of the fee-farm rent by the Crown in 1660. Eventually, in 1664, the hall petitioned the exchequer to restore the exhibitions. Its attorney claimed that the principals had traditionally appointed the exhibitioners and had issued receipts for their money to the king's receiver-general in Somerset. This sounds convincing, but does not fit with the patronage evidently exercised by the exchequer officials or with the principal's apparent ignorance of the exhibitions in 1652. The restoration of the payment was approved, at any rate, and from about 1664 Hart Hall once more enjoyed possession of Sir John Byconyll's benefaction, though it was very much reduced in value by this time.³⁰

A List of Byconyll Exhibitioners, 1546-1633

(From P.R.O., Exchequer, Land Revenue, LR 6/15/1 to LR 6/22/9, and LR 6/104/1-4. These accounts run from Michaelmas to Michaelmas each year, and the exhibitioners were invariably admitted (adm.) or vacated their exhibitions (vac.) at Michaelmas. The college attributions occur in the accounts; when surnames are spelt in different ways, the alternatives are given in brackets.)

Walter Colmer	John Wetcombe (Metcombe, Wetcombe)
occ. 1546, vac. 1559	occ. 1546, vac. 1559
John Ashe (Aishe, Asshe, Ayshe)	John Goding (-e, Goodwin)
occ. 1546, vac. 1559	occ. 1546, vac. 1559
William Radbert (-e)	Richard Attewe
occ. 1546, vac. 1559	occ. 1546, vac. 1559
Walter Were	Thomas Colthurst
occ. 1546, vac. 1555	adm. after 1548, occurs 1551, vac. 1559
Robert Pawlet (-t)	Thomas Garbron
occ. 1546, vac. 1555	adm. 1559, vac. 1572
Ralph Hunte	Thomas Turner
occ. 1546, vac. 1559	adm. 1559, vac. 1572
John Hodge	Philip Randall
occ. 1546, still in 1548, vac. by 1551	adm. 1559, vac. 1572

²⁸ Transcript in Bodl. MS. Wood F. 28, f.257v.

²⁹ Letter of 1664 from George Day to John Freke in *ibid.* ff.258-9. For Day's career, see J. Foster, *Alumni Oxonienses, 1500-1714* (4 vols. 1891-2), i, 387, and A.G. Matthews, *Calamy Revised* (1934), p.160. He held property at Meare (Somerset), so presumably came from the Glastonbury area.

³⁰ Bodl. MS. Wood F. 28, f.256. Anthony Wood used this and the other documents cited from the MS. to write his account of the exhibitions in *Colleges and Halls*, pp.642-3.

- Jasper Haywarde (Haidward)
adm. 1559, vac. 1572
- Thomas Brickenden (Bick-, Breken-, Brekin-,
Bruck-, Bryck-, Bryk-)
adm. 1559, vac. 1584
- Richard Goughe
adm. 1559, vac. 1572
- Richard Harrys (Harry, -e)
adm. 1559, vac. 1572
- John Ersden (Earsdin, Earsdinem, Ersdinem)
adm. 1559, vac. 1572
- William Newman
adm. 1559, vac. 1572
- Anthony Strange
adm. 1559, vac. 1560
- William Hethewete (Hetgewete)
adm. 1560, vac. 1572
- Edmund Messenger
adm. 1572, vac. 1576
- Thomas Harrington
adm. 1572, vac. 1574
- John Smythe of Magdalen College
adm. 1572, vac. 1581
- Michael Lewes
adm. 1572, vac. 1577
- Ambrose Rogers
adm. 1572, vac. 1575
- John Boytell
adm. 1572, vac. 1577
- Thomas Speryn
adm. 1572, vac. 1581
- Christopher Atkinson (-kyn-)
adm. 1572, vac. 1576
- Quintin Stoninge (-ynge)
adm. 1572, vac. 1576
- Hugh Monkefeilde (Monckeffelde, Monkefelde,
Monkesfelde)
adm. 1574, vac. 1581
- Anthony Mason *alias* Bartlet (-t)
adm. 1576, vac. 1583
- Edward Flower
adm. 1576, vac. 1584
- Robert Morley (Moreley)
adm. 1576, vac. 1583
- William Colme
adm. 1577, vac. 1581
- Thomas Hanbury junior (Hanburie)
adm. 1577, vac. 1584
- William Jordan, junior
adm. 1581, vac. 1583
- Samuel Foxe (Fox)
adm. 1581, vac. 1586
- John Bailie (Baylie) of New College
adm. 1581, vac. 1601
- William Maundie
adm. 1581, vac. 1584
- Lewis Barfield (Barfeilde, Barfield)
adm. 1581, vac. 1593
- Robert Breache
adm. 1583, vac. 1584
- Nicholas Jordan
adm. 1583, vac. 1584
- John Tirret
adm. 1583, vac. 1584
- John Woolforde (Walvard)
adm. 1584, vac. 1586
- Edmund Brekenden
adm. 1584, vac. 1588
- Francis Bettes (Bette)
adm. 1586, vac. 1592
- William Ewen
adm. 1586, vac. 1598
- Hugh Barker of New College
adm. 1588, vac. 1590
- Robert Barker of New College
adm. 1590, vac. 1598
- Ralph Bayly
adm. 1592, vac. 1604
- Ambrose Sacheverell of New College (Cheverell,
Chiverell)
adm. 1593, vac. 1608
- Anthony Barker of New College
adm. 1598, vac. 1610
- Edward Bettes of New College
adm. 1598, vac. 1614
- Edmund Coles of New College
adm. 1601, vac. 1605
- Thomas Watkins of New College
adm. 1604, vac. 1614
- William Trussell of New College
adm. 1605, vac. 1608
- Nicholas Darrell
adm. 1608, vac. 1614
- Robert Lloyd
adm. 1608, vac. 1610
- Thomas Grinte (Grent, -e)
adm. 1610, vac. 1623
- Peter Carter
adm. 1610, vac. 1614
- Thomas Crane
adm. 1614, vac. 1625
- Philip French
adm. 1614, vac. 1625
- Thomas Woode
adm. 1614, vac. 1616
- Thomas Anderton
adm. 1615, still in 1633
- Henry Stringer
adm. 1616, still in 1633
- Henry Grinte
adm. 1623, vac. 1631
- William Crane
adm. 1625, vac. 1632
- Thomas French (-e)
adm. 1625, still in 1633
- Henry Stanley
adm. 1631, still in 1633
- Robert Grebbie
adm. 1632, still in 1633

The Society is grateful to Hertford College, Oxford, for a grant towards publication of this paper.