

NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

THE ASCOTT PARK GATEWAY'S LINK TO ALEXANDER NECKHAM (1157–1217), AN EARLY OXFORD LECTURER

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From an early stage, the Weston Library included what the plans describe as a 'Jacobean gateway' marking the path between Blackwell Hall and readers' entrance, borrowed from the Victoria and Albert Museum.¹ The entablature bears the inscription:

SI BONVS ES INTRES: SI NEQVAM NEQVAQVAM

If you are good, you may enter; if wicked, by no means.

The placard placed beside the portal when the building reopened points to the humour in the inscription as a reminder of the Bodleian Library declaration. The gateway's placement at the University is even more appropriate than this: the original version of the line was addressed to one of Oxford's earliest known lecturers, Alexander Neckam or Nequam (1157–1217), admired until the early modern period as one of the most outstanding writers of medieval England but largely forgotten in the age of print.

The gateway is dated to the 1580s or 1590s, with eighteenth-century ironwork, and was originally a garden entrance at Ascott Park near Stadhampton in Oxfordshire. Sir Michael Dormer (d. 1545) acquired this manor in 1518; a raid in 1642 heavily damaged the house. Sir William Dormer (d. 1683) began to rebuild it in 1660, but it burnt down in 1662 before completion. The remnants were demolished in the early nineteenth century.² Sir Paul A. Makins (1871–1939) purchased the gateway in 1924 and gave it to the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1925 on the condition that they install a wooden replacement; it was on display for many years in the West Hall.³ Only one obscure and anonymous report

¹ *New Bodleian: Making the Weston Library* (Oxford, 2016), pp. 132–3.

² John Steane and James Ayres, *Traditional Buildings in the Oxford Region, c.1300–1840* (Oxford, 2013), pp. 52–6; Mark Bowden and Anya Rardin, *Ascott Park, Stadhampton, Oxfordshire: Analytical Earthwork Survey of a 17th-Century Park and Garden*, English Heritage Research Department Report (Swindon, 2007).

³ Diane Bilbey and Marjorie Trusted, *British Sculpture, 1470 to 2000: a Concise Catalogue of the Collection at the Victoria and Albert Museum* (London, 2002), no. 50 (A.5–1925); Victoria and Albert Museum, *Review of the Principal Acquisitions During the Year 1925* (London, 1927), p. 5.

Notes and Documents

on its installation appears to have identified the inscription's reference to Alexander Neckam.⁴ The museum placed the gateway in storage during a refurbishment and placed it on long-term loan to the Bodleian after determining that it could not be returned to its original location. Separately, in 2015 the Library acquired a map of Ascott Park that William Burgess made in the early eighteenth century.⁵

The inscription is from a story that Matthew Paris (c.1200–1259) records in its earliest form, in a marginal addition to his *Gesta abbatum*, placing it with events of 1183. Following studies in Paris from c.1177 to c.1182, Alexander taught at Dunstable for around a year, presumably as a secular cleric, before applying to the eminent school in his native St Albans.⁶ The gateway's text is based on the abbot's reply:

¶ *Quiddam iocosum.*

Hic cum temporis anno scilicet proximo transacto apud Dunestaple scolam rexisset, uocauit eum abbas Garinus hiis litteris breuiter et iocose scriptis (petiuerat enim idem Alexander Nequam scolam sancti Albani instanter): Si bonus es, uenias; si nequam, nequaquam. Cui tam breuiter et iocose rescribens Alexander ait: Si uelis, ueniam; sin autem, tu autem. Ac si diceret: Non multum curo.⁷

¶ *Something funny.*

After he had led the school at Dunstable for the year previous, Abbot Warin called him briefly and jestingly in this letter, for that same Alexander Nequam had asked him insistently for the school at St Albans: 'If you are good, you may come; if wicked (*nequam*), by no means.' Replying to him, Alexander said just as briefly and jestingly, 'If you wish it, I will come; if not, *Tu autem*' – as if he had said, 'I don't much care.'

In the face of this witty retort, the abbot hired him. The phrase 'Tu autem' is short for 'Tu autem Domine miserere nostri', used for closing a reading within the office of matins, or as part of the formal business of

4 'Notes and Gleanings', *Fortnightly Review* (St Louis, MO), 34 (1927), pp. 136–7.

5 Bodl., MS. C17:49 (326), discussed in Nick Millea and David Howell, 'Revealing the Past: How Science is Unlocking Cartographic Secrets', in *Dissemination of Cartographic Knowledge*, eds. Mirela Altić, Imre Josef Demhardt and Soetkin Vervust (Cham, Switzerland, 2018), pp. 333–6.

6 R. W. Hunt, *The Schools and the Cloister: The Life and Writings of Alexander Nequam (1157–1217)*, ed. Margaret T. Gibson (Oxford, 1984), pp. 3–4 discusses the dating.

7 Matthew Paris, *Gesta abbatum* (London, British Library, Cotton MS Nero D. 1, fol. 50rb), printed in *Gesta abbatum monasterii sancti Albani, a Thoma Walsingham, regnante Ricardo secundo, ejusdem ecclesie precentore, compilata*, ed. Henry T. Riley, *Rerum Britannicarum medii aevi scriptores*, 28.4, 3 vols. (London, 1867), i, p. 196; also edited and translated with context in Arthur F. Leach, *Educational Charters and Documents, 598 to 1909* (Cambridge, 1911), pp. 132–5.

Bodleian Library Record

a chapter meeting or refectory. Oxford colleges still used it to conclude the statutory readings at meals into the nineteenth century.⁸ Alexander moved to Oxford by the early 1190s, where he describes himself as ‘reading publicly in theology’.⁹ His life there is obscure, but he likely joined the Augustinian canons at St Frideswide’s Priory (now Christ Church), where he gave an Ascension Day sermon to raise funds after a large fire (MS. Wood empt. 13, fol. 93v).¹⁰ He later worked at Cirencester Abbey, arriving before 1203, becoming its abbot in 1215.

The story became a favourite with antiquarians, in whose writings the gateway’s creators likely found it. Henry Kirkestedede (c. 1314–after 1378, known in the early modern period as John Boston of Bury) reports a variant form that fits less well with the other evidence. In his version, Alexander was applying to become a monk at St Albans, and taking offence at the abbot’s remarks went to Cirencester instead.¹¹ John Bale (1495–1563) copied it from Kirkestedede, and William Camden (1551–1623) tells a similar version.¹² Alexander’s work at Oxford had not yet been uncovered; the text was likely chosen for its cleverness rather than its link with an Oxfordshire figure.

Although the Weston Library’s architects were unaware of Alexander Neckam, a coincidence in the underground shelving has turned it into a memorial of which medieval people would approve. Alexander’s only known autograph manuscript – Oxford, Jesus College, MS. 94, on deposit with the Bodleian – is stored almost directly beneath the gateway. It includes a worn and fragmentary copy of his *Glosses on the Psalter* (*Glose super psalterium*), arising from his teaching work.¹³ These are

8 Andrew Hughes, *Medieval Manuscripts for Mass and Office: a Guide to their Organization and Terminology* (Toronto, 1995), pp. 60–61; H. C. K., ‘Tu Autem’, *Notes and Queries*, 3, no. 75 (1851), 265–6 describes Oxford college traditions.

9 Alexander Neckam, *Super cantica* 1, no. 4 (Oxford, Magdalen College, MS 149, fol. 5rb): ‘puplice legerem in theologia’. Quoted with context in Hunt, *The Schools and the Cloister*, p. 8 n. 36; Helmut Riedlinger, *Die Makellosigkeit der Kirche in den lateinischen Hoheliedkommentaren des Mittelalters*, Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie und Theologie des Mittelalters, 38.3 (Münster, 1958), p. 322 n. 4.

10 Andrew N. J. Dunning, ‘St Frideswide’s Priory as a Centre of Learning in Early Oxford’, *Mediaeval Studies*, 80 (2018), 253–96, at 273–85.

11 Richard H. Rouse and Mary A. Rouse, *Henry of Kirkestedede. Catalogus de libris authenticis et apocryphis*, Corpus of British Medieval Library Catalogues, 11 (London, 2004), pp. 100–101.

12 John Bale, *Index Britanniae scriptorum*, eds. Reginald Lane Poole and Mary Bateson (Oxford, 1902), p. 24; William Camden, *Remains Concerning Britain*, ed. R. D. Dunn (Toronto, 1984), p. 135.

13 Hunt, *The Schools and the Cloister*, pp. 97–102, making a case for the handwriting at pp. 30–31; see also Michael Gullick, ‘A Twelfth-Century Manuscript of the Letters of Thomas Becket’, *English Manuscript Studies 1100–1700*, 2 (1990), 1–31.

Notes and Documents

likely from his work at Oxford, putting them among the earliest lecture notes to survive from its schools. The volume as a whole binds together three separate manuscripts on which Alexander had worked directly, one of them left incomplete, almost as relic similar to St Dunstan's Classbook (MS. Auct. F. 4. 32). Walter of Mileto, who gathered and promoted Alexander's works after his death, was likely responsible for the form the book now takes.¹⁴ In premodern churches, altars to a saint typically contained a relic from their dedicatee or had them buried in the crypt below. One could hardly have executed a more fitting monument to this early teacher and writer.

¹⁴ Andrew N. J. Dunning, 'Mileto [Melida, Melide], Walter of (fl. c.1170–c.1220), Scribe and Augustinian Canon', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2018).