

A HISTORY OF THE THOMAS ALLEYNE ACADEMY

It all started when...

Thomas Alleyne (Allyn, Alen or Allen) (c. 1488 - 1558), clergyman and benefactor, was born in Sudbury, Staffordshire, where he later made provision for the commemoration of his mother, and his father, William. Although he had several brothers and sisters, only one of them is identifiable now; Ralph (d. 1547), who prospered as a grocer in London and was sheriff there in 1545/6.

Thomas Alleyne's early career is obscure. His later relationship with Trinity College, Cambridge, suggests that he was educated at either King's Hall or Michaelhouse, the forerunners of Trinity, but no record survives to substantiate this. The Warden of King's Hall at the time Alleyne would have been there was Geoffrey Blyth, the Bishop of Litchfield. If our Thomas Alleyne was the Thomas Alleyne who received a grant of arms in 1542, then he had by then attained the degree of Bachelor of Divinity, and although this is not confirmed elsewhere the identification is a likely assumption.

We do not know when Thomas Alleyne took Holy Orders, though he was a priest (and thus aged at least twenty - four) in 1512, when the fourth earl of Shrewsbury presented him to the rectory of Shirland, Derbyshire, in Geoffrey Blyth's diocese of Coventry and Lichfield. In 1513 Shrewsbury also presented Alleyne to the rectory of Thornhill, near Doncaster, so clearly Alleyne enjoyed the favour of the earl. It is almost certain that Alleyne is the "Thomas Alen, priest", who was acting as the earl's agent around this time.

By 1526 (and aged at least 38) Thomas Alleyne had become rector of Stevenage, a valuable living in the gift of the abbot of Westminster. The first parson known to have resided in the parish for half a century (his house, 'Woodfield', still stands, though much altered), he was clearly a diligent and respected incumbent, frequently called upon to act as an arbiter in local disputes and as a trustee for wills and contracts. Residence at Stevenage would also have had the advantage of enabling him to stay in closer contact with his brother Ralph in London.

In the will that he drew up in January 1542, Ralph Alleyne divided his moveable goods into three equal portions, bequeathing the first to his wife, the second to his children, and the third to his brother, Thomas Alleyne. We do not know how much money became available for charitable uses from Ralph's bequest to Thomas, but it certainly

stimulated Thomas into creating a substantial estate of his own during the following decade.

Thomas Alleyne's own will, which he drew up on 20 May 1558 (in at least his 70th year), suggests that whatever compromises he may have had to make to retain his livings during the 1540s and 1550s, he was in religion essentially an Erasmian conservative. He bequeathed his soul to the Trinity alone, making no mention of the Virgin or the Saints, and hoped for a place in heaven 'through the merits of Jesus Christ'.

At the same time he made ample provision at Sudbury, Shirland, Thornhill and Stevenage, for prayers both for his own soul and for the souls of his parents and siblings. He also took steps to secure his own commemoration, requiring burial in Stevenage parish church, between the chancel and choir, under a marble stone inscribed with his name, the date of his death, and a 'petition and desire' for the prayers of 'all men that shalle looke upon the same...' (PRO, PROB 11/42A fol. 38v). He remembered five godchildren and five servants, and left gold rings to twenty named men and woman, as well as a silver cup and a surplice to his kinsman Simon Aleyn, vicar of Cookham and Bray in Berkshire, the original 'vicar of Bray' of the famous poem and song.

His executors were John Langley, a London goldsmith who had married Thomas's cousin Joan, and one James Allen of Shirland. The latter was the James Alen named as a cousin in Ralph's will, and seems to have been Thomas's son, either illegitimate or born of a lawful marriage contracted before his father took major orders. A father - son relationship is also suggested by Thomas's provision for James of a £10 annuity and a lease of lands at Whetstone, Leicestershire, where James lived until his death in 1578.

Thomas Alleyne died shortly before 3 August 1558, when he was buried in Stevenage parish church (St Nicholas' Church), doubtless as he had requested, though no memorial survives. His will was proved on 17 February 1559.

All Thomas Alleyne's several individual bequests were overshadowed by the provision he made for the advancement of education. Four days after making his will, he added a codicil intended to secure the future of three schools, at Uttoxeter and Stone, both in Staffordshire, and at Stevenage.

Assisted by Ralph's legacy, Thomas had been purchasing estates to fund these works during the 1550s, for instance buying lands at Whetstone, Blaby and Countesthorpe in Leicestershire from Sir Ralph

Rowlet in 1555. By the time of his death he also had property at Tillington, near Stafford, at Wittersham in Kent, and in London, particularly within the parish of St Martin Ludgate, as well as in and around Stevenage itself.

All this, valued at some £80 per annum, he now conveyed to the master and fellows of Trinity College, Cambridge. From the revenues they were to appoint and finance a schoolmaster at each place, who was to receive a yearly salary of £13 6s. 8d. apiece, and provide free tuition to boys who had a firm grounding in grammar and lived within two or three miles of his school. The Schoolmaster could augment his salary by teaching fee - paying pupils who came from further away. In Stone and Uttoxeter Alleyne specified the locations of his schools. He made no such provision in Stevenage, indicating that the school there was already in existence, and the school seems to have been held in Daune's house, Daune being described in the Will as a schoolmaster.

The Stevenage bequest was both enhanced and complicated by Alleyne's foundation coming to share its premises in 1562 with another new school, founded by subscription amongst the towns pupils to provide a basic education for "the Pettits", which coincided with the end of Daune's time as "Master Allen's Scholemaster." It has remained on the same site ever since.

Alleyne did not leave a large amount of cash in his Will, and there remains a question as to what he did with the income from the land he had been buying since Ralph's death. The evidence suggests that Alleyne had been maintaining schoolmasters at all three places during his lifetime, though only the master at Stevenage, Marcus Petrus Daune, can be identified as one of them. Alleyne's concern was thus primarily to ensure the continuance of institutions that he was supporting already (as was the habit in bequests of the age generally), and to that end he provided not only an endowment but also statutes.

Addressed to 'My dearly beloved children', they allowed the pupils holidays at Easter and Whitsun, together with one afternoon's play every week, but otherwise provided for the rigorous inculcation of classical learning, to the extent that even the conversation of the pupils 'shalbe in Latine in all places among themselves, as well as in the streets and their playes as in schoole...'. The prescribed hours were long, and discipline was to be maintained by the rod, though unually for the time - although perhaps to be expected from an active local pastor - Alleyne also expressed a humane concern for good behaviour and manners. Prayers were to be said morning and evening, and after the morning collect the pupils were to petition for 'increase in virtue and

learning to the perpetuall fame and thankfulness of our founder Maister Allen...'

Thomas Alleyne is still commemorated by the three schools he endowed, all of which bear his name. Their later fortunes have been in many respects similar, not least in that all three declined in standing in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, becoming little more than elementary schools, until they were revived and reformed in the Victorian age. Thereafter they remained at first under the Governorship of Trinity College, Cambridge, but during the twentieth century were drawn into the state system of education.

The present - day Alleyne's High School, Stone, having become a maintained school controlled by Staffordshire County Council in 1920, was successively converted into a co - educational grammar school in 1936, and a comprehensive school in 1969.

Thomas Alleyne's High School at Uttoxeter became a maintained grammar school in 1921, when it, too, passed under the control of the county council, before becoming co - educational in 1964, when it merged with Uttoxeter High School for Girls, and then comprehensive in 1974.

The Thomas Alleyne School in Stevenage was known as Master Allen's school from the year after its Founder's demise. Officially styled Alleyne's Grammar School in 1869 and then Alleyne's School in 1969, when it became comprehensive, it acquired its present name twenty years later when it was amalgamated with the former Stevenage Girls' School. It has faced closure many times, most notably when Stevenage was declared the world's first post - war New Town, yet despite all, it is still on the site it has occupied for four and a half centuries, a short walk both from Thomas Alleyne's Church and from his home.

Three schools, all still in existence after more than four hundred years. It is an extraordinary legacy for an obscure 16th century country clergyman.

Richard Stephens, 13th October 2006

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