

The Afterlife of William Worcester

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William Worcestre as imagined in the 19th century

We are gathered here today 600 years after his birth to celebrate William Worcester as a topographer. Yet for three centuries from his death in the 1480s Worcester was mentioned as a collector, editor, translator, a minor literary figure, even an astronomer, but not as a topographer. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries he attracted little attention from the Tudor and Stuart antiquaries, who did so much to preserve and bring to attention the works of their medieval predecessors. In this paper I want to explore the reasons for this comparative neglect. To ask the question, did they know Worcester was a topographer? And, if not, why not? I will also examine the historical context of the emergence of Worcester as a topographer at the end of the eighteenth century and the particular resonance his work had for his nineteenth-century editor.

After Worcester died, his work as an antiquary and compiler of manuscripts was not forgotten. Some six decades later he was included in John Bale's manuscript index of British writers, associated with

five miscellaneous manuscripts and the three volumes intriguingly entitled *Anglorum antiquitates*.¹ It was known that he came from Bristol, but had spent much of his life in the service of the Norfolk knight Sir John Fastolf. One of the manuscripts listed by Bale was the now lost *Acta domini Johannis Fastolf*, an early example of secular biography. The *Acta* and the *Anglorum antiquitates* were in the Benedictine monastery in Norwich until the Dissolution, but thereafter dispersed. His other manuscripts known to Bale were at Magdalen College, Oxford. College libraries were not in those days stable institutions which necessarily preserved their collections over generations and these manuscripts too were subsequently dispersed.

As we shall see, manuscripts in college libraries were not necessarily more accessible to scholars than those in private hands. The dispersal of his manuscripts by itself did not cause Worcester's subsequent neglect. By the early seventeenth century some of Worcester's manuscripts had come into the hands of Thomas Allen of Gloucester Hall, Oxford, a mathematician with a penchant for the past and an enthusiastic collector. Through his role as a tutor at Oxford, where Robert Burton of the *Anatomy of Melancholy* was one of his students, and as a collector of manuscripts, Allen cultivated a wide circle of scholarly acquaintances and correspondents.² Members of this circle were welcome to view, copy and borrow Allen's manuscripts. Consequently, some at least of Worcester's manuscripts were available for antiquaries to study.

To digress slightly, I thought I might do a quick 6 degrees of Thomas Allen, to show how he was linked to some of the people I will mention in this paper. So - Thomas Allen was a friend of the Staffordshire historian Sampson Erdeswicke, who was assisted in his research by William Wyrley. Wyrley, who later became a herald, collected church notes with William Burton, the historian of Leicestershire. Thomas Allen was also tutor at Oxford of William Burton's younger brother, Robert, author of the *Anatomy of Melancholy*. One of Robert Burton's few surviving letters is to John Smyth of Nibley, concerning a living that he had been promised by the Berkeleys. William Burton introduced William Dugdale to Sir Simon Archer, with whom he worked on the history of Warwickshire. They were helped by Archer's cousin Henry Ferrers of Baddesley Clinton, who was a friend of Sampson Erdeswicke, which leads us back to Thomas Allen. It was through such networks that Elizabethan and early Stuart antiquaries learnt about manuscripts in private hands.

The manuscripts acquired by Allen are thought to have included Worcester's *De Agri Norfolkensis familiis antiquis*. Notes on this volume were taken by the Norfolk antiquary Sir Henry Spelman, who Archer and Dugdale met in London during the 1630s. Spelman apparently saw the manuscript shortly after Allen's death, when it may have been in the hands of his friend Sir Kenelm Digby. Spelman's pet theory was that the sacrilege of acquiring church lands led to the downfall of gentry families and Worcester's genealogical notes on the pre-Reformation East Anglian gentry were particularly useful

1 John Bale, *Index Britanniae Scriptorum* ed. Reginald Lane Poole & Mary Bateson (Oxford, 1902), 116-17.

2 K.B. McFarlane, 'William Worcester: A Preliminary Survey' in *England in the Fifteenth Century* (1981), 199-224.

for his research. The original manuscript is now lost, but the notes Spelman took from it survive.³ These indicate that the manuscript was at least 188 folios long and contained genealogical details for the East Anglian gentry and notes on churches and towns. We can't tell whether there was a wider range of material of the type we now associate with Worcester, since Spelman only took notes on what interested him rather than making a full transcript. Through this manuscript and Spelman's notes Worcester became known as a genealogist of East Anglian families. As a result of this association his name subsequently became attached to a fifteenth-century parchment roll of arms belonging to the Norfolk antiquary Peter Le Neve.⁴

If the manuscript of the *Itinerary* had been acquired by Thomas Allen, Worcester's importance as an antiquary beyond East Anglia and as a topographer would almost certainly have become widely known in the seventeenth century. The wide circle of antiquarian friends, to whom Allen lent his manuscripts, included William Camden, the most famous topographer of the age. If the author of *Britannia* had seen the *Itinerary*, Worcester would surely have received his due recognition as a topographer. However, the *Itinerary* was acquired not by Allen but by Archbishop Matthew Parker.⁵ We do not know how it came to be in Parker's collection, although it is tempting to imagine that it was one of the manuscripts given to him by John Stow and that the Elizabethan antiquary's own *Survey of London* was to an extent influenced by Worcester. Yet this seems unlikely, since if the manuscript had passed through Stow's hands, we would expect his antiquarian circle which included Camden to have known of Worcester the topographer. We would also expect Stow to have made a copy, before passing the manuscript on.⁶

When we consider the use that Stow's contemporaries and successors could have made of the *Itinerary*, it becomes obvious that they can have had no idea of its existence. John Smyth of Nibley, who voraciously collected all references to the Berkeley family, clearly had no knowledge of the description of Bristol. If he had been aware of it, he would certainly have referenced it in relation to Sir Maurice Berkeley of Beverstone and the Berkeley association with St Katherine's.⁷ Similarly Sir Simon Archer and William Dugdale obviously knew nothing of the *Itinerary* when working on *The Antiquities of Warwickshire*. Worcester's manuscript contains notes on the building work of Richard Beauchamp, thirteenth earl of Warwick and on the knights who fought alongside Richard Neville, 'the Kingmaker' at the battle of Edgecote Moor in 1469. There was also useful biographical information contained in Worcester's account of Bristol about his maternal ancestors, the Botoner family of Coventry. The Botoners were important merchants, providing two fourteenth-century mayors of Coventry and being responsible for the erection of the steeple of St Michael's church in the city. Yet

3 Norfolk CRO MS 7197.

4 Norfolk CRO, MC 2802/5, 958X1 – Richard Manson, Portcullis at College of Arms to Peter Le Neve, Norroy, 5 Jun 1728; BL, Lansdowne MS 778/65.

5 Corpus Christi, Cambridge, Parker MS 210.

6 Barrett L. Beer, *Tudor England Observed* (1998), 15.

7 Frances Neale, *William Worcestre: The Topography of Medieval Bristol* (Bristol Record Society, 2000), 163, 165, 281, 283; John Smyth, *The Berkeley Manuscripts*, ed. Sir John Maclean (1883-5), vol. 1, 110, 351.

Dugdale, who lived only a few miles from Coventry and had close associations with its civic community, knew very little about the Botoners. Furthermore the notes collected by Worcester on his journeys through the West Country would have been of interest to his successors such as Richard Carew in Cornwall, Thomas Westcote and Tristram Risdon in Devon and Thomas Gerard, who worked on both Dorset and Somerset. Yet during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the wide potential interest of Worcester's topographical notes went unexplored.

So, although Worcester was known to Elizabethan and Stuart antiquaries, this was predominantly as a manuscript collector and translator. He was recognised for his work on the Norfolk gentry and Robert Plot acknowledged him as an astronomer in the *Natural History of Oxford-shire*.⁸ Yet his *Itinerary* was either unknown or unappreciated. Consequently, despite his Bristolian and Midlands heritage, Worcester was firmly associated as an antiquary with East Anglia. Typically one of the few scholars known to have examined the manuscript of the *Itinerary* before its eventual publication was the Norfolk antiquary Francis Blomefield in 1751. Worcester's comparative neglect stands in striking contrast to that of his near contemporary John Rous. As a chantry priest at Guy's Cliff, on the outskirts of Warwick, Rous had the undoubted advantage of being rooted in the area where his manuscripts were of most interest. On his death he left his books and manuscripts to the library that was established above the porch in St Mary's church, Warwick. From the evidence of Worcester's own travels and those of itinerant monks such as Andrew Boorde and John Boston, it is easy to see how Rous's reputation was kept alive and his manuscripts known as scholars and curious travellers visited the library at Warwick and the chantry at Guy's Cliff. Some four decades after his death Rous was described by the most famous of these travelling scholars John Leland in his *Itinerary* as 'an expert mathematician in his day, and a great historian'.⁹ The visual appeal of the Rous rolls of the earls of Warwick, which were designed for presentation and valued as artefacts by their subsequent owners, were of course very different in nature from Worcester's private topographical notes. These were manuscripts that were intended to be exhibited and their owners were pleased to show them off. They were also copied: the English version by the herald Robert Glover in Elizabeth's reign and the historian of Leicestershire William Burton in 1613, and the Latin version by William Dugdale in 1636. The Midlands historians also consulted the manuscript of Rous's *Historia Regum Angliae* in Sir Robert Cotton's library with its account of the deserted villages of fifteenth-century Warwickshire. In the years before the civil war they made considerable, if unrewarded, efforts to track down the other manuscripts attributed to Rous by Leland and others. These efforts included an approach by Sir Simon Archer to Sir Kenelm Digby, who had acquired many of Thomas Allen's manuscripts.

It was unfortunate for Worcester's subsequent reputation, that Leland did not mention him in relation to Bristol as he referred to Rous in his account of Warwick. Leland's own *Itinerary* was well known to the circle of antiquaries who would have valued Worcester's manuscript. Burton had eight volumes of

8 Robert Plot, *The Natural History of Oxford-shire* (2nd edn, 1705), p. 227.

9 John Chandler, *John Leland's Itinerary* (1993), 463.

Leland's original, of which he gave seven to the Bodleian (the other having been lent and lost). Burton and Dugdale both copied the manuscript, while the work in its most complete extent is known from a copy made by John Stow in 1576. The failure to mention Worcester in the comparatively extensive treatment of Bristol and Gloucestershire in the *Itinerary* suggests that Leland never saw his predecessor's description of his native city. We cannot know. If, as K. B. McFarlane suspected, Worcester's *Itinerary* was one of the manuscripts encompassed by Bale's *Anglorum antiquitates*, it would have been at Norwich until after the Dissolution. Very few of Leland's notes concerning East Anglia survive. It is possible that some reference to the description of Bristol was in those lost notes. However, as a result of his close association with Norwich, where he was a monk before the Reformation, John Bale had greater opportunities to explore the manuscripts in its monastic archives than Leland and the *Antiquitates Anglorum* may have been one of his discoveries.

Even if Leland had mentioned Worcester's description of Bristol in his account of the city, Worcester's topographical notes would not have been appreciated by all his antiquarian successors. When sent a copy of some of Leland's *Itinerary* by Sir Simon Archer, the genealogist and collector Edward Gwynne dismissed it as 'these silly Journalls voyde of Antiquitie but what they drawe from vulgar Relacion' and believed it was the work of 'some laborious Trivialist rather than the great Leland'.¹⁰ Worcester's own manuscript would presumably have received an equally unsympathetic assessment from the many antiquaries, whose main obsessions were genealogy and heraldry. Nevertheless, as we have seen, there were a number of antiquaries, who would have found value in the manuscript. Moreover, as the application of the empirical methods associated with Sir Francis Bacon to the study of the past became increasingly popular, a growing section of the antiquarian community would have appreciated Worcester's patient measurement of the Bristol streets, bridges and churches. One thinks of the mathematician John Greaves, who described crawling his way into the pyramids of Gaza and wrote a discourse on the actual length of a Roman foot. Or of Elias Ashmole pacing out the dimensions of Lincoln cathedral, York minster and other places when touring eastern England with William Dugdale in 1657. Yet such interest in the material culture of the past represented a minority pursuit in antiquarian circles.

An important factor in Worcester's neglect by later generations of historians was the ingestion of his *Itinerary* into the bowels of a Cambridge college library. Before his death in 1575 Parker left his manuscripts to the university to be housed at Corpus Christi under strict regulations concerning their restricted use. The terms of Parker's gift ensured that his manuscripts were catalogued and carefully conserved, but gaining access to them was difficult for historians who were not Cambridge scholars. The manuscript's presence within a collection dominated by religious works also reduced its visibility. The Parker library would not have been the most obvious place to look for topographical works for someone trying to make the best use of limited time and access to the rich resources available at

¹⁰ Jan Broadway, *No historie so meete* (2006), 26.

Cambridge. Had it been in the library of an Oxford college, it might during the civil war have come to the attention of one of the antiquaries resident in that city during its time as the royalist capital. Men such as Dugdale, who lived in the city for some 4 years, had plenty of opportunity to explore thoroughly the various college libraries.

In 1600 a catalogue of the manuscripts in the college libraries of Oxford and Cambridge was published by the Bodleian librarian, Thomas James. This included Worcester's *Itinerary* as manuscript 377 of 396 and a further volume containing excerpts transcribed around the time the manuscript arrived in Cambridge was also noticed. However, as the James catalogue provided only terse statements of content, its perusal would not have alerted a scholar to the value of the *Itinerary*. Ironically Sir Simon Archer did have extracts from the transcript of John Rous's *Historia Regum Angliae*, included by James as manuscript 317, indicating that the Midlands circle had some form of access to the Parker library.¹¹ A further catalogue with slightly longer descriptions was published in 1722 by William Stanley, a fellow of Corpus Christi and dean of St Asaph. However, the antiquarian potential of Worcester's manuscript was only made apparent in the next catalogue produced in 1775 by James Nasmith, another fellow. This catalogue, which was published two years later, provided far more detailed descriptions than its predecessors. Half a century later the then Master of Corpus John Lamb recorded that the work took Nasmith nearly five years, which Lamb thought was unsurprising, 'when we recollect the inconvenience of the room over the old ante-chapel, in which these manuscripts were deposited, and likewise the strictness of the rules under which they are necessarily kept by the Will of the donor'.¹² If access was inconvenient for college fellows, it was even more restrictive for external scholars. Nasmith's catalogue brought 'several curious manuscripts' to the notice of scholars. Its item by item description of the *Itinerary* occupied 9 pages and for the first time revealed the riches therein to the wider antiquarian community.¹³ The following year Nasmith published a transcript alongside the Parker collection's fourteenth-century account of Simon Simeon's pilgrimage from Ireland to Jerusalem. Thus after almost three centuries the *Itinerary* was ushered onto the public stage, although the limited circulation of this volume and the lack of notes limited its usefulness and impact, while access to the manuscript remained difficult.¹⁴

A full appreciation of the topographical value of Worcester's work awaited the publication of an annotated edition of his account of Bristol by James Dallaway half a century later.¹⁵ Dallaway was born in Bristol in 1763 and educated at Cirencester Grammar School and Trinity College, Oxford. After graduating he served as curate at Rodmarton, then at Rodborough. He edited the first two volumes of Ralph Bigland's *Historical, Monumental, and Genealogical Collections, Relative to the*

11 Corpus Christi, Parker Library MS 101, MS 110.

12 John Lamb ed., *Masters' History of the College of Corpus Christi* (1831)

13 J. Nasmith, *Catalogus librorum manuscriptorum quos Collegio Corporis Christi et B. Mariae Virginis in Academia Cantabrigiensis legavit Reverendissimus in Christo Pater Matthaeus Parker, Archiepiscopus Cantuariensis* (Cambridge, 1777).

14 H. Southern & N. Harris eds., *The Retrospective Review*, second series, vol. 2 (1828), 232, 452-3.

15 James Dallaway, *Antiquities of Bristow* (Bristol, 1834) – described in *The Gentleman's Magazine* (August 1835), 164 as a re-publication in a single volume.

County of Gloucester and in 1789 was elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London. By 1793 he was studying medicine at Oxford, with a special interest in the plague, still prevalent in the Near East. He took his degree in 1794 and through the patronage of the Marquis of Bute was appointed chaplain and physician for Robert Liston's embassy to the Ottoman Porte. His subsequent account of his travels *Constantinople Ancient and Modern, with excursions to the shores and islands of the Archipelago, and to the Troad* was published under the patronage of Lord Bute, who subsequently commissioned Dallaway to edit the works of his grandmother, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. On his return to England Dallaway was appointed as secretary to the earl marshal, the 11th Duke of Norfolk, who had strong links to Gloucester. He was subsequently presented by the duke to livings in Sussex and Surrey. He published works on art and architecture and at the instigation of the duke started a history of Sussex. When the duke died in 1815, he was succeeded by his Roman Catholic cousin. Although Dallaway retained his post as secretary to the earl marshal, the 12th duke did not become his patron in the manner of his predecessor.

By 1815 Dallaway was a man in his fifties, who had travelled widely and published prolifically on a range of subjects. He felt a strong association with his native city, despite having spent much of his career far from it. His career had been directed by two powerful patrons in Lord Bute and the Duke of Norfolk, but they were both now dead and he was free to follow his own interests. It was around this time that Dallaway began editing William Worcester's topographical account of Bristol. The parallels in the two men's careers are striking and it is clear that Dallaway felt a strong affinity for his fellow Bristolian. The title page of the *Itinerarium* is dated 1822, although it is known from its inclusion in the single volume of Dallaway's *Antiquities of Bristow* published shortly before his death in 1834. Another publication by this prolific author not included in that volume sheds light on Dallaway's own personal sense of kinship to his antiquarian predecessor. In *William Wyrcestre Redivivus. Notices of Ancient Church Architecture in the fifteenth century, particularly in Bristol. With hints for practicable restorations*, published in 1823, Dallaway drew freely on Worcester's manuscript and preceded the main text with an imaginary encounter and conversation with Worcester on Worle Hill above Weston-super-Mare.¹⁶ In this he drew attention to the parallels between their careers, writing:

We were born, perhaps, under the same planet ... and under its influential direction we retain the local predilection. Our youth passed at Oxford, and we have both spent the best part of our days; each in the service of an honourable and high born master, as his confidential secretary. They are departed to the world of Spirits! You had a house and lands to return to at Bristow, I am a sojourner, and wish to devote a short time to pursuits similar to your own, as applied to the same objects.

Indeed, since Dallaway had seen Worcester's manuscript of medical receipts that is now in the British Library, he thought he had been a medical doctor, drawing another link between them. Consequently,

¹⁶ James Dallaway, *William Wyrcestre Redivivus. Notices of Ancient Church Architecture in the fifteenth century, particularly in Bristol*. (Bristol, 1823)

in his daydream Dallaway sought Worcester's permission that he should call himself William Worcester reborn – the title which in Latin he gave his book.

The publication of *William Wyrcestre Redivivus* indicates how the rediscovery of Worcester's *Itinerary* came at an apposite time. Namely, when growing attention was being paid to England's medieval architectural inheritance. Medieval buildings had excited the interest of antiquaries for generations, but predominantly as the settings for historical events, the storehouses of monuments and heraldic glass or, once ruined, as reminders of the transience of human existence and the decline from a lost Golden Age. As enthusiasm for Gothic as opposed to Classical architecture increased in the late eighteenth century, however, medieval buildings acquired an importance as an expression of a national aesthetic. Preservation and conservation of buildings became an important strand in the work of the Society of Antiquaries, rather than simply the recording of their appearance in engravings.¹⁷ It was to this project for the 'pure restitution' of the churches of Bristol to their 'Gothic' splendour that Dallaway enlisted the support of Worcester's ghost.

If William Worcester had been a less fascinating character – if he had travelled less widely, concentrated his scholarship more narrowly, contrived to live in less 'interesting' times – the antiquarian community might have come to appreciate him sooner. As it was, his *Itinerary* with its fascinating description of medieval Bristol hid in plain sight in a Cambridge college library for three centuries. Ironically, the same period that saw his manuscript brought to light also witnessed the publication of the first volumes of the Paston letters and William Worcester the topographer once more had to share the stage with William Worcester, man-of-business to Sir John Fastolf and executor of his will. It was in keeping with his multi-faceted career that it should be so.

¹⁷ Rick Turner, 'Fabric, Form and Function: The Society and 'The Restoration Question' in Susan Pearce, *Visions of Antiquity* (2007), 307-27.