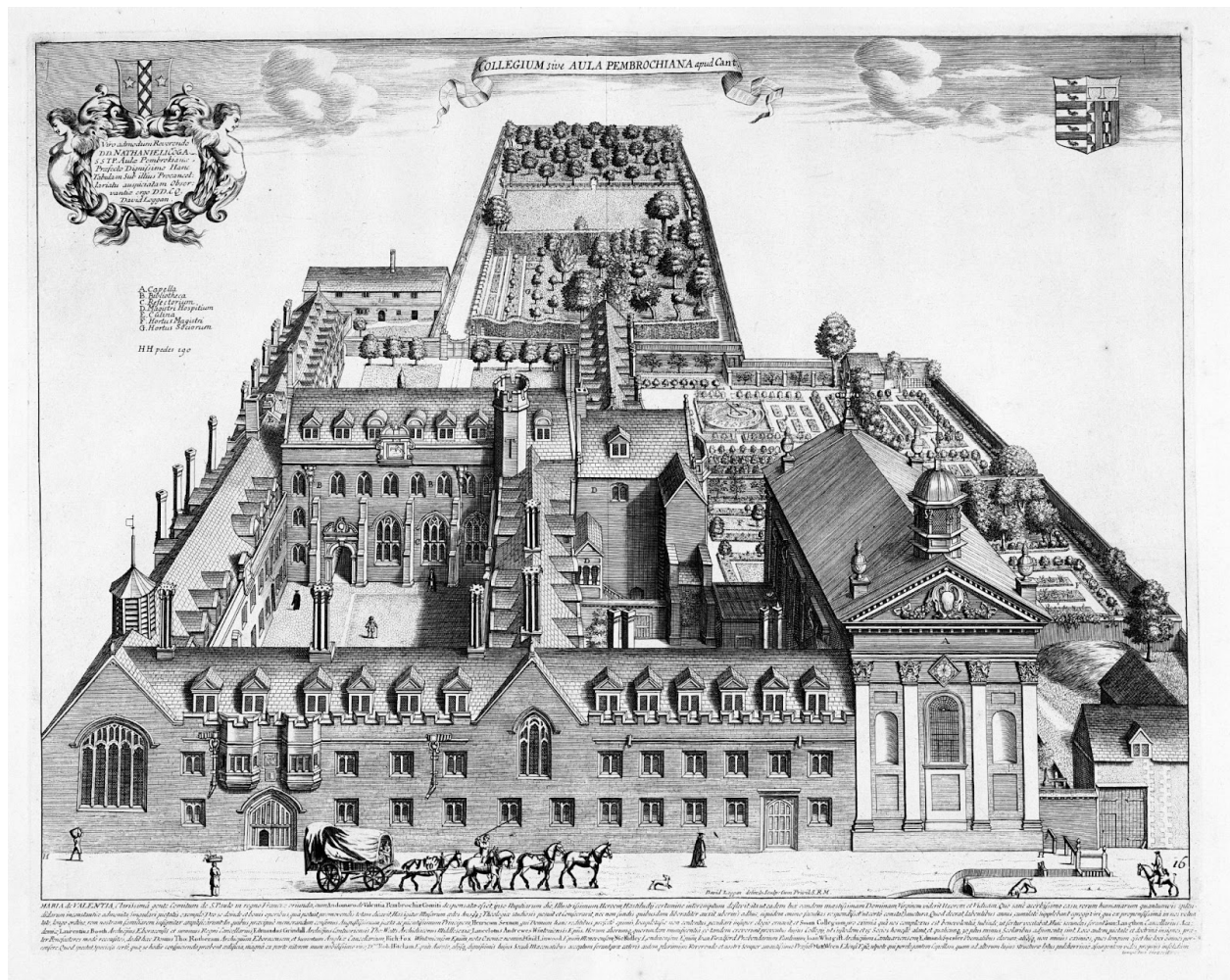


William, 5th Earl of Coventry's Cambridge Connection

By Adam Edwards, MSc FRGS

In 1693 Mount Etna erupted, triggering an earthquake that killed over 60 000 people in Sicily and Malta; the College of William and Mary was founded in Williamsburg, Virginia; and the University of Heidelberg was wrecked by the besieging French army. England was at war with France as part of the Grand Coalition in the Nine Years War.

And for William Coventry, later to be Croome's unexpected 5th Earl, a career was inauspiciously beginning at Cambridge.



David Loggan's sketch of Pembroke Hall, showing the new Wren Chapel, from Cantabrigia Illustria, 1680. By permission of the Master and Fellows of Pembroke College, Cambridge.

A University of the Age of Enlightenment

The wider University populace was a vibrant one, coloured by the aftermath of political and religious turbulence, but was also brimming with intellectual vivacity. Academic, religious and political disputes in the country were closely reflected on and reacted to by the Cambridge polis.

The arts syllabus at Cambridge is only vaguely described in the statutes of the time, but tradition and consensus encouraged an education focusing on rhetoric, Aristotelian logic, natural science and natural philosophy. Lectures were delivered by University professors, but the educational direction lay with the College Tutors. Several of these, such as James Dupont and Richard Holdsworth, wrote manuals for their students which were heavily influenced by Isaac Newton. From these, successive tutorials were written in the ensuing years to improved educational rigour.

Appointed the 2nd Lucasian Professor of Mathematics at just 26, Newton would spend thirty-five years at Trinity, leading to further successes as the Master of the Royal Mint and President of the Royal Society. It is indicative of the character of Cambridge's academic culture that the University would only provide a quarter of the Royal Society's membership, while continuing to populate the Church, the courts, and, increasingly, Parliament.

Religion and politics were inextricably entwined at Cambridge. The expectation (albeit dwindling in terms of actual duties and commitment: Newton was notable for refusing Orders) was for Masters, Fellows and graduating students to be ordained, and this was still the accepted (and often moneyed) route to a comfortable career well into the nineteenth century. Many Masters were often either previously, currently, or about to be sitting on a bishop's throne.

This reliance on Church patronage would in turn colour the piety and politics of Colleges. Cambridge would see Colleges gain a reputation across the Anglican communion, ranging from the arch Anglicanism of King's to the puritanism of Emmanuel. Pembroke had a significant relationship with the Bishops of Ely, two of whom fundamentally shaped the College (and weighed on the University as a whole) in the seventeenth century: Lancelot Andrews and Matthew Wren.

The questions of Divine Right and control of the Church of England and its doctrine saw the splits in the later Jacobean Court into the Tory and Whig camps. The Tories backed the Divine Right of James II, while the supporters of William and Mary were predominantly Whigs. This was reflected in the University and saw a series of dismissals on political grounds, causing academia to be a precarious profession and leading to factions using the Vice-Chancellorship to wage feuds against academic opponents. The University was particularly resentful of James II's efforts of trying to install Catholics into the University, and therefore minded to support William and Mary's bid for the throne. Switching camps would also lead to especially bitter opprobrium amongst one's peers.¹

It is in this environment of factionalism that William Coventry likely cut his political teeth as a Whig, though there is unfortunately little surviving documentary evidence from this period of his life.

¹ Morgan, Victor, and Christopher Nugent Lawrence Brooke. A History of the University of Cambridge, Volume 21546-1750. Verlag nicht ermittelbar, 2004.

A Gentlemanly Education

William Coventry, born in Whitechapel in 1676, matriculated into Pembroke Hall², Cambridge on 13th April 1693. His father, Walter,³ was a successful haberdasher, son of another Walter⁴, a draper and Common Councilman of the City of London. Walter Senior was the youngest son of Thomas Coventry, the Lord High Keeper of the Seal.⁵ This branch of the family maintained links with Croome D'Abitot, as evidenced by Walter Senior sponsoring an apprentice from Croome⁶. William's mother Anne was the daughter of Devon merchants, the Holcombe family, mainly based in Holborn.

William's father had died the previous May, though his mother would live until 1728. According to Walter Junior's will, he left a small fortune of about £9000 to the family, including a third-part to his widow, Anne. This third-part is about £550,000 in 2025 values. Another third-part was divided between the children, mainly in the form of dowries for his daughters, and support for William and his brother, Thomas.⁷ Anne seems to have lived well in London, residing with two of her daughters, though eventually left only a fraction of this inheritance in her will, including £100 to William as Earl.

It is likely that William was aware of the Parliamentary careers of his relatives as a source of inspiration or ideal. Thomas, Baron (and later, the 1st Earl, raised in 1697) Coventry, and Sir William Coventry, the latter being prominent in Navy matters in the 1660s as a colleague of Sir Samuel Pepys at the Admiralty. It is notable that, unlike other Coventrys, William did not attend Oxford, (or follow his father and grandfather into the Guilds) but went up to Cambridge instead.

The solution becomes apparent when one looks at the Fellows of Pembroke Hall and finds his uncle, Samuel Holcombe.⁸ Samuel was Anne Coventry's youngest brother and only 7 years older than William. He was in residence and likely arranged his nephew's matriculation. Holcombe had been ordained in 1691, and resigned his Fellowship in 1693 to take up the vicarage of Cherry Hinton in Cambridge – a regular step in a church career – but continued to dine in Hall as part of the community. In his later career, he became Chaplain to King George I in 1716, a prebend of Canterbury Cathedral, and interestingly for Croome, vicar of Severn Stoke in 1724 with his nephew William as patron⁹. Coupled with William's appointment in 1717 to joint Comptroller of the Green Cloth, the role administering the Royal travel arrangements¹⁰, the association with the Royal Court of uncle and nephew hints at a long mutually-beneficial relationship. Samuel would outlast William, dying in 1761 with burial in Canterbury Cathedral.

²Pembroke was not renamed as a College until 1856

³ <https://www.combedown.org/tng/getperson.php?personID=I132377808865&tree=PtNfm2023>

⁴ <https://www.combedown.org/tng/getperson.php?personID=I132377808874&tree=PtNfm2023>

⁵ Boyd, Percival Boyd's Roll, Drapers Company of London, handwritten register c. 1934

⁶ Draper's Company Rolls, apprenticeship of Richard Goodale
https://www.londonroll.org/event/?company=drp&event_id=DREW4619

⁷ Will of Walter Coventry, Merchant of London, National Archives PROB 11/409/436

⁸ <https://ancestors.familysearch.org/en/MM2B-T8Y/samuel-holcombe-1665>

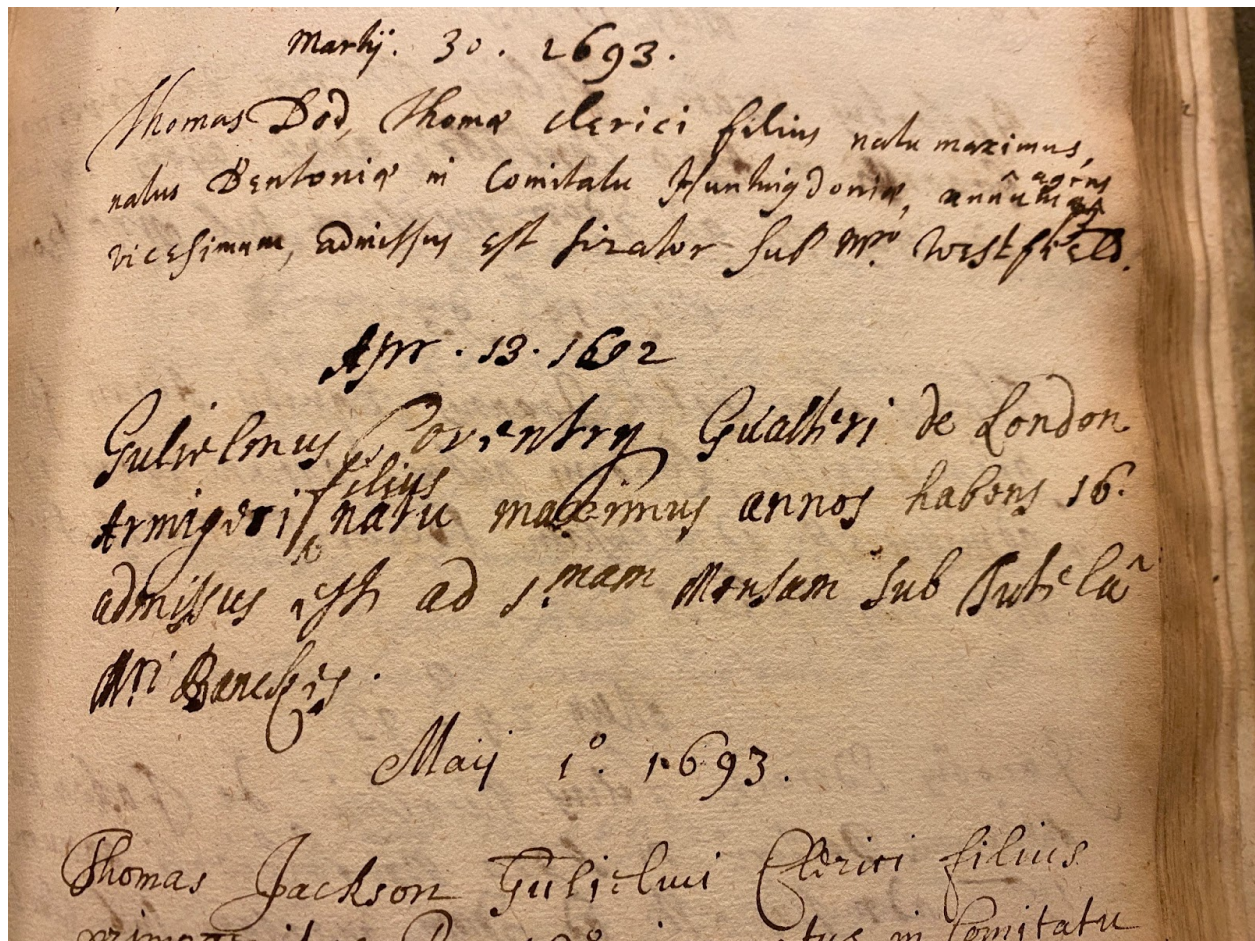
⁹ Nash, Treadway Russell. Collections for the History of Worcestershire. Vol.2 1781

¹⁰ Gordon, Catherine. The Coventrys of Croome. Phillimore, 2000.

Pembroke, a re-modelled College

Founded by Marie de St Pol, Countess of Pembroke, in 1347, and navigating the academic and political turbulence of the times, Pembroke was coming to the end of significant architectural development that would last until the expansions of the nineteenth century.

William is entered into the Admissions Book by a College member's hand – the tradition of signing oneself in was yet to be established – as a Fellow Commoner. Matthew Wren himself had started this book, and the practice continues to this day. Fellow Commoner was a class of student who paid for living in College and shared dining privileges with the Fellows of the College, a mutually beneficial arrangement for the College coffers and purportedly the student's development. Not necessarily expecting a degree, a Fellow Commoner effectively paid for tutoring in topics suitable for a gentleman, an air of respectability and the opportunity to network. William's time at Pembroke was brief. The dining accounts give evidence of his presence in the Hall from April 1693 to September 1694 only.



William Coventry's matriculation entry, by unknown hand. By permission of the Master and Fellows of Pembroke College, Cambridge.

We do not know what academic activity William engaged with as a Fellow Commoner, though records state his tutor was Mr William Bancks, notable for a Cambridge Press edition of Catullus. The Senior Tutor was John Westfield, a respected academic that Pembroke continued to support even after his dismissal for refusing to swear fealty to Queen Anne. He was instrumental in acquiring properties for the College and was a local benefactor of St Mary the Less opposite the College, where his wife donated silver for the serving of alms to the poor.¹¹

A near-contemporary at St John's, the diarist Abraham de la Pryme, described the day to day in 1690 as:

*"We go to lecturs every other day, in logics, and what we hear one day we give an account of the next; besides we go to his chamber every night, and hears the sophs and junior sophs dispute, and then some is called out to conster a chapt[er] in the Now Testament ; which after it is ended, then we go to prayers, and then to our respective chambers.... In this my fresh-man's year, by my own propper studdy, labour and industry, I got the knowledge of all herbs, trees, and simples, without any body's instruction or help, except that of herbals : so that I could know any herb at first sight. I studded a great many things more likewise, which I hope God will bless for my good and his honour and glory, if I can ever promote anything thereof".*¹²

William Coventry would have attended mass regularly in the new Chapel, the first building designed by the future Sir Christopher Wren, which was sponsored by his uncle Matthew Wren, bishop of Ely and president of Pembroke. The Wren Chapel was completed in 1665. The Master of Pembroke at the time of William's matriculation, Nathaniel Coga (Master, 1677-94), had overseen this and other renovations including the absorption of two local hostelries into the College's fabric, expanding capacity.

The old Chapel, on the corner of Pembroke Street and Trumpington Street, was converted into the College library in 1690.¹³ A grand affair for the time with the books moved from the old chained library, displayed in grand bookcases – of whom a pair remains – with the case-ends now part of the wall decorations. The College accounts record the costs for the conversion as well as the portage of the books between the libraries. This Old Library still sports an impressive plasterwork ceiling by Henry Doogood.

William Coventry was also a contemporary of Christopher Wren the Younger, son of the architect, who had matriculated at Pembroke Hall in 1691 and is listed amongst those dining regularly until 1695, though he also left without a degree. Both Pembroke men would have been aware of each other through their election to Parliament as Whigs and Christopher the Younger's short-lived Westminster career.

¹¹ Cooper, Charles Henry. Memorials of Cambridge. Vol. 3. W. Metcalfe, 1866.

¹² De la Pryme, De la Pryme, Abraham. The diary of Abraham De la Pryme, the Yorkshire antiquary. Vol. 54. Society, 1870.

¹³ <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/cambs/vol3/pp346-355#h3-s4>

no	Mr. [unclear]	0. 1. 0.		
no	Mr. Staldeston.	0. 2. 0.		
no	Mr. Hamkins.	0. 2. 0.		
8.	Mr. Mapl. toft.	0. 2. 0.	0.	8
no	Mr. Greene.	0. 9. 0.	0.	9
no	Mr. Nash.	0. 2. 0.		
9	Mr. Holder.	1. 4. 06.	1.	1
10	Mr. Slad.	1. 4. 0.	0.	11
no	Mr. Greene.	0. 2. 0.		
p. no.	Mr. Coventry.	0. 3. 0.	0.	2
no	D. Reed.	0. 1. 0.		
11.	D. Crossinge.	1. 3. 0.	1.	3
12.	D. Parl. H.	1. 4. 0.	1.	0
13.	D. Watkinson.	1. 1. 06.	1.	0
14.	Jbott.	0. 11. 06.	0.	5
15.	Farth. n.	1. 7. 0.	1.	4
16.	Wron.	1. 2. 06.	1.	2
17	Umfroy.	1. 2. 0.	1.	2
18	Quinton	1. 1. 06.	0.	11

Pembroke's dining accounts form 1693. William is 5th of the middle block, understood to be the Fellow Commoners. Christopher Wren the Younger is the penultimate name. By permission of the Master and Fellows of Pembroke College, Cambridge.

It is difficult to build a detailed picture of life at Pembroke other than through the accounts payable to a small staff, including a laundress, and accounts received from a variety of tenant farmers and parish livings. There is a steady increase in size of the community, from 45 to 60 Fellows and scholars over this short time, though still below pre-Civil War numbers.

Considering the political scene at the time, Queen Anne's known Tory support and Westfield's unofficial support as "socius ejectus" (ejected Fellow, or one who had been expelled from the College) we can infer a Pembroke Hall that is politically tolerant, stepping adeptly through the maze of social upheaval. It is of note that Pembroke was able to retain some of the Cromwellian appointees from the Civil War past the Restoration of Charles II, when other Colleges saw the complete replacement of their Fellows

Replacing the silver



Candlesticks
Pair of William and Mary candlesticks with engraved arms, crest and mantling. Possibly the earliest candlesticks in Cambridge. 1690. Maker unknown (marked 'TA').
Given by William Coventry, Fellow Commoner, 1692
Reference: 80



The donated candlesticks, as part of the Pembroke Treasures Display (left).
A close up of the embossed heraldry (above).

By permission of the Master and Fellows of Pembroke College, Cambridge.

Pembroke had been one of those Colleges who had responded to King Charles II's plea for financial support and had sent its accumulated silver collection to Oxford supposedly for safekeeping, but in reality to be melted down, apart from the Foundress Cup and the Anathema Cup (famously inscribed with a curse against any who removed it from the College). However, it was intercepted by cavalry under Oliver Cromwell and diverted to Parliament's own coffers.

This left Pembroke Hall without silver for High Table meals and other grand occasions, and a tradition started where Fellow Commoners would donate an item, usually a tankard or a plate, to the College upon matriculating. Not all Colleges were royalist in sentiment. Corpus Christi and Caius and Gonville hid key parts of their collections, and extant examples today give an indication as to what was lost.¹⁴

William Coventry's own contribution was a pair of silver candlesticks commissioned in London, dated to 1690. These are paired, with raised crests of William and Mary and silver hallmarks, albeit of poor impression. The initials TA likely refer to Thomas Allen, father or son, as both were active in the Goldsmith's Company in the 1680s to 90s.¹⁵

Conclusion

It appears that William's affinity to Pembroke was as brief as his stay there. There are no records of donations or preferments found to date in the College archives. William's will has no reference to any bequests to Pembroke or other institutions¹⁶. There are no records of further members of the family attending Pembroke, but William's grandson, the Hon. John Coventry (the second son of George William the 6th Earl) matriculated as a Fellow Commoner of Trinity Hall. John's brother William James, George William's fourth son, matriculated as a Fellow Commoner at Peterhouse in 1817. Another John, a grandson of George William, is found on Emmanuel College's books in 1812.¹⁷

Francis Coventry, a son of Thomas Coventry, William's brother, attended Magdalene College, Cambridge and was sponsored by William to the curacy of Edware by William, though was lost to smallpox at the age of 34 in 1759. Another nephew, Henry Coventry also became a Fellow of Magdalene College.

¹⁸ This is but a snapshot of what evidence is available of William's early years. Cambridge held a central place in the Establishment of a country in turmoil, providing an education, both formal and informal, for young gentlemen aspiring to success in the elites of society. It is therefore logical that this experience was intentionally sought out as a form of betterment of William's prospects on top of his financial security. The in-fighting, conducted with a veneer of learning and legality, in Cambridge would have sharpened William's understanding and own argument, ready for the equally savage pursuit of gentlemanly politics.

¹⁴ <https://feast-and-fast.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/discover/tudor-bling-at-high-table>

¹⁵ <https://www.silversmiths.co.uk/Makers/London-TA-TC.html#TA>

¹⁶ As per holdings with Worcester Archive and Archaeology Service

¹⁷

<https://venn.lib.cam.ac.uk/cgi-bin/search-2018.pl?sur=Coventry&suro=w&fir=&firo=c&cit=&cito=c&c=all&z=all&tex=&sye=&eye=&col=all&maxcount=50>

¹⁸ Gordon, Catherine. *The Coventrys of Croome*. Phillimore, 2000. p81

William is a bit of a cypher in his early political career as the MP for Bridport, characterised as voting in support of the Whig position but with little else to show. To gain traces of William's political career, one can access Hansard and there are fleeting mentions of his name in The London Magazine's Parliamentary reports in the 1730s, though William is only known to have delivered one major speech in the Commons, seven years after first election. William's Whiggish sympathies likely ended with the personal feud with Sir Robert Walpole. This came about when Walpole who, according to the Egremont papers, tried to auction the sale of the Office of the Clerk of the Parliaments between Coventry and William Cowper¹⁹. That William Coventry was able to obtain and carry substantial amounts of cash as part of this affair is an indication of the wealth he commanded. Upon taking up the Earldom and his seat in the Lords, Coventry became known as a malcontent and continued to oppose Walpole, though his embarkation of securing and improving the Croome estate and its standing in Worcestershire appears to become his priority.

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Further Reading:

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¹⁹ <https://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1715-1754/member/coventry-william-1676-1751>