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SIR WILLIAM OSLER AND THE MUNIMENTS OF THE ALMSHOUSE AT EWELME

By CHARLES T. AMBROSE

In the village of Ewelme, situated in a valley of the Chilterns fourteen miles south-east of Oxford, is a magnificent group of fifteenth-century buildings – St Mary's church, an almshouse and school, collectively known as God's House – all the charitable foundation of Alice (1404–78), granddaughter of Geoffrey Chaucer, and her husband William de la Pole, Duke of Suffolk. Alice and William, then Earl and Countess of Suffolk, were in 1437 granted leave by Henry VI to found the almshouse for two chaplains and thirteen poor men, who were to pray for the souls of the King and of the Earl and Countess during their lifetimes and after their death, along with those of their parents, friends and benefactors, and of all the faithful departed. Between 1441 and 1446 the almshouse was endowed with the manors of Connock, Ramridge and Marsh Gibbon;¹ and statutes for its governance were drawn up a few years later.² The buildings survive to this day and, having escaped suppression during the Reformation, still function under the de la Poles' endowment.

The statutes specified that of the two chaplains one was to be Master of the Almshouse and the other to teach grammar in the foundation's school and that each was to receive an annual stipend of £10.³ The school was to provide free education for children from Ewelme manor and the three manors owned by the almshouse. The history of the foundation in the sixteenth century is not well documented. Along with all the de la Pole family estates, God's House was appropriated to the Crown in 1513 upon

the execution of Edmund, the last Earl of Suffolk (by then Henry VIII's only surviving Yorkist rival). In 1607 James I augmented the income of the Regius Professor of Medicine at the University of Oxford, by annexing to it the mastership of the almshouse at Ewelme. As a consequence, for more than 350 years the Master has 'been an absentee with no previous knowledge of or connection with the place, and this circumstance has benefited and prejudiced the foundation by turns ever since'.⁴ This article concerns the thirty-third master, Sir William Osler (1849–1919), who assumed this appointment as Regius Professor at Oxford in 1905.⁵

Osler was the pre-eminent English-speaking physician of his day.⁶ A Canadian by birth, he had taught and practised medicine at the universities of McGill (1874–84), Pennsylvania (1884–9), and Johns Hopkins (1889–1904), and had established a reputation as an outstanding teacher. The Regius Professorship was prestigious, but its duties were not onerous, and Osler was able to devote much of his time to two posts associated with it – as Master of the almshouse at Ewelme and as Curator of the Bodleian.⁷ When his predecessor, J. S. Burdon-Sanderson wrote to Osler in May 1905 he mentioned 'bidding farewell to the old men in the Almshouse at Ewelme' as one of the last duties he had to perform as Regius Professor; but he planned to defer this until 'we get anything like summer weather'.⁸ With the notable exception of Sir Henry Acland, there is little evidence that previous Masters had considered their office as anything other than a sinecure.⁹ In contrast, Osler was much taken by the Ewelme Almshouse and travelled there often, having an advantage over his predecessors of acquiring a motor-car with a chauffeur in 1907. As early as June 1905, a letter of Mrs Osler gives an account of their visit to 'the much-talked of Almshouse, at Ewelme' and her conviction that her husband 'will make [the men] fond of him and be good to them'.¹⁰ The Oslers frequently went to the almshouse with friends, often staying several days in the rooms set aside for the Master (Fig. 1). Osler's butler, who sometimes accompanied him to Ewelme, did not enjoy the 'primitive existence' there and declared, 'Historic interest is well enough, but I prefers modern life'.¹¹ Lady Osler described each excursion as 'a long drive'.¹²

It was during one of their visits to Ewelme, in July 1906, that Osler noticed a neglected, rusty safe in the muniment room of the almshouse. It could not be opened immediately, but a locksmith was summoned from Chubb's in London¹³ and managed to open the safe. One of Osler's Canadian nephew, W. W. Francis,¹⁴ is pictured in a photograph (pasted into the 1880 catalogue of the muniments) spreading the safe's contents on the grass in the graveyard to dry (Fig. 2). The catalogue was compiled in 1880 by the Rector of Ewelme, the Rev. William Wigan Harvey (1810–83, *ex officio*

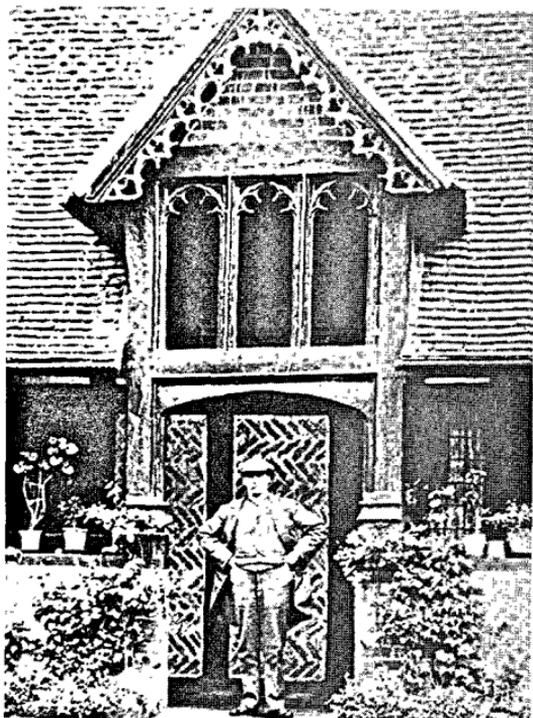


Fig. 1. William Osler standing at the south gable of the Ewelme Almshouse in 1909. (from Sir William Osler, *An Annotated Bibliography with illustrations*. R. L. Golden & C. G. Roland, eds. (San Francisco, 1988). Reproduced with the kind permission of the Osler Library, McGill University).

a trustee of the Almshouse). In it he acknowledges that his work had been greatly facilitated by the annotations made on many of the documents by Dr John Kidd (1775–1851, Regius Professor and Master of the Almshouse from 1822).¹⁵ In a lengthy note added to Harvey's catalogue Osler recounts how the interior of the safe 'was coated uniformly with mould and the documents were reeking with damp' and how he 'took them to the Bodleian where Maltby [the University binder] put them in order & bound them'.¹⁶ They were returned to Ewelme and continued to be admired by visitors in the Muniment Room,¹⁷ until deposited for safe-keeping in the Bodleian in 1947.¹⁸

The Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts published William Harvey's account of the Ewelme muniments in the appendix to its *8th Report* in 1881. When the appendix was reissued in 1909 reference was made to the documents and their seals having been, 'under the present Master's [Osler's] direction', 'admirably arranged in volumes especially adapted for the purpose'. The earliest documents, of the fourteenth century, relate to



Fig. 2. W. W. Francis spreading on the church yard grass the documents found in the rusty safe at Ewelme in July 1910. (Bodleian Library, MS. D.D. Ewelme b. 2, fol. iii^v).

the manors of Marsh Gibbon, Connock and Ramridge and also to Norton in Somerset and to other de la Pole lands; with them is a small collection of mainly medical recipes, including one for making ‘Cape Salepetr – pondus xvjd, de sulfure . . .’, which came to be known as gunpowder. The final product was described as ‘then unknown to warfare but useful for making a ‘*oribble noise [oribilem sonum]*’.¹⁹

Of particular interest among the fifteenth-century documents are three letters written by Alice de la Pole to her steward, William Bylton. The collection also includes rental and audit accounts, manorial court rolls, leases, title deeds and inventories, which together provide a wealth of information on the management of the estates with which the almshouse was endowed.

POSTSCRIPT

Among the most notable features of St Mary’s church in Ewelme are the two tombs holding remains of the three Chaucers – Alice and (together) her father and mother. These have been thoroughly described by John A. A. Goodall in his definitive book on the foundation.²⁰ Of further interest to Oslerians and others visiting God’s House is an early twentieth-century memorial in the nave – a large black marble plaque bordered in white, commemorating Sir William Osler, his wife Grace Revere Osler, and their son, Edward Revere Osler, killed at Ypres during World War I (Fig. 3). Osler is

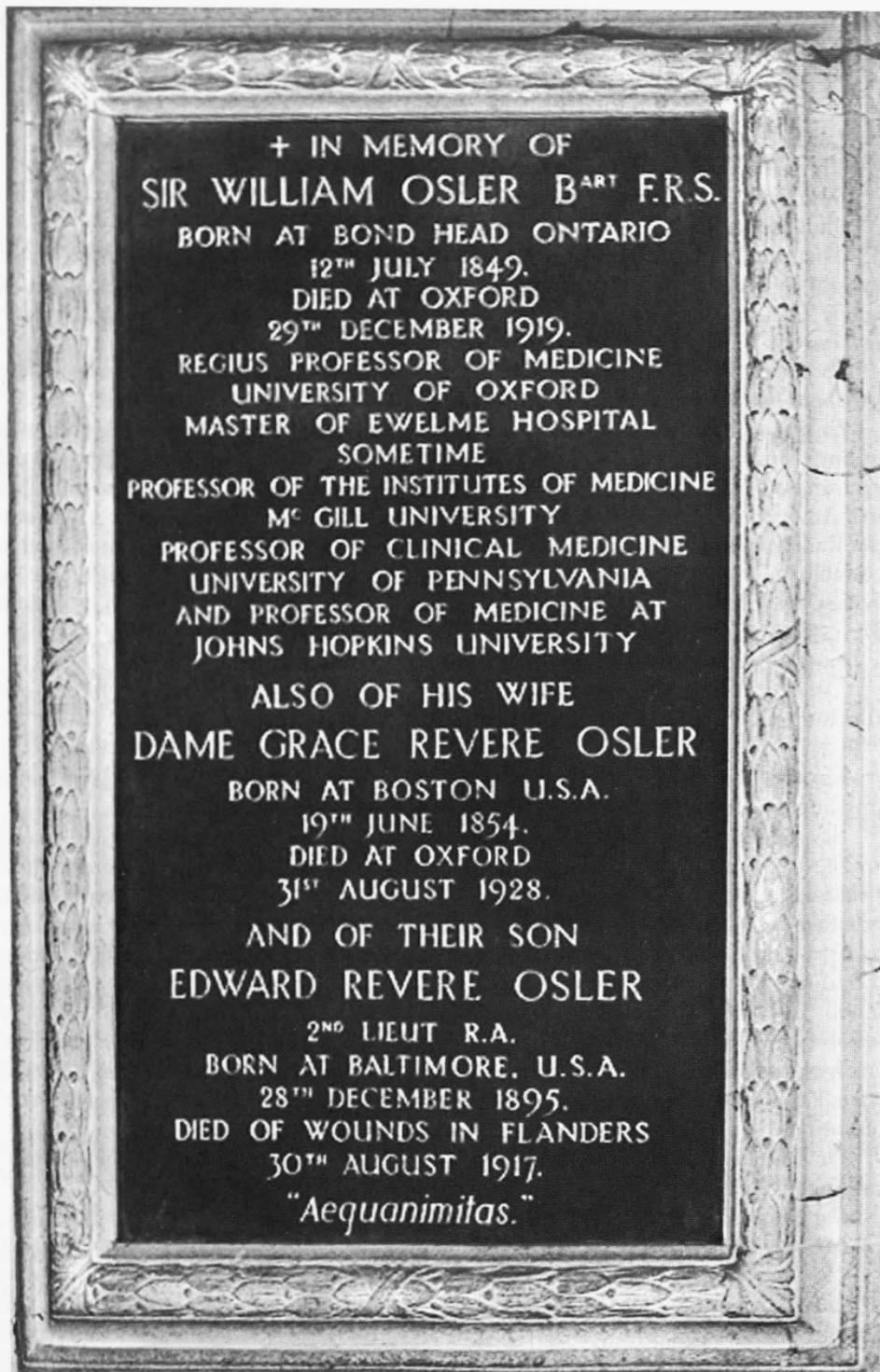


Fig. 3. Wall memorial to Sir William and Lady Osler and their son, Edward Revere, in the nave of St Mary's Church at Ewelme.
(Author's photograph, 2005).

recorded here as 'Master of Ewelme Hospital'. At the bottom of the plaque is incised his personal maxim, *Aequanimitas*.

¹ Letters patent of Henry VI, now Bodleian Library, MS. D.D. Ewelme a. 4.

² The statutes are now MS.D.D. Ewelme d. 42.

³ John A. A. Goodall, *God's House at Ewelme* (Aldershot, 2001), p. 111.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

⁵ The chief sources for Osler's role as Master of the Ewelme almshouse are the biography by Harvey Cushing, *The Life of Sir William Osler*, 2 vols. (London, 1940) and Caroline Ticknor, 'Sir William Osler and the thirteen pensioners of Ewelme', *Scribner's Magazine*, 77 (1925), 417–22.

⁶ See article in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*: 'At the time of his death Osler was without doubt the most famous and revered Anglophone doctor in the world.'

⁷ *Ex officio* a Curator of the Bodleian, Osler was very soon elected a member of its Standing Committee and as early as 1906 made his own significant contribution towards the purchase of the Shakespeare First Folio, meanwhile soliciting substantial gifts from North America. He enthusiastically supported plans for the construction of a bookstore under Radcliffe Square, for the revision of the Bodleian catalogue of printed books, and for the establishment of a *Quarterly Record* to draw attention to the Library's acquisitions and activities. See Sir Edmund Craster, *History of the Bodleian Library, 1845–1945* (Oxford, 1981), esp. pp. 181, 317, and Cushing, *Life of Sir William Osler*, ii, 30, 70, 388–9.

⁸ Cushing, *Life of Sir William Osler*, i, 681.

⁹ Much of Acland's correspondence in Bodleian Library, MS. Acland d. 88 concerns the tenants on the manor of Marsh Gibbon and their poor living conditions.

¹⁰ Cushing, *Life of Sir William Osler*, ii, 6.

¹¹ Caroline Ticknor in *Scribner's Magazine*, 77 (1925), 419.

¹² Cushing, *Life of Sir William Osler*, ii, 6.

¹³ Several years ago I toured St. Mary's Church and the almshouse with Mr. George Cannon, then its general guide and formerly teacher at the nearby Ewelme Church School. He was unable to provide me with any information about the safe's fate or present location, or whether it still exists. On the remote possibility that there might be some record of it elsewhere, I contacted Mr. Alan Grave, a representative of the firm which is the successor to London's nineteenth-twentieth century Chubb and Sons Lock and Safe Company Limited. The original company's few archives and records on microfiche contain no mention of the 1906 visit of a man from Chubb to the Ewelme Almshouse. I am grateful to Alan Grave for his letters of 20 Sept. and 28 Oct. 2005, and for lending me *Chubb Collectanea Edition*. Parenthetically, a full, fascinating history of safes may be found in Richard Byrne's book entitled *Safecracking: Tales and Techniques of the Master Criminals* (London, 1991).

¹⁴ Dr William Willoughby Francis (1878–1959), compiler of the catalogue of Osler's library, bequeathed to McGill, where Francis became the first Osler Librarian.

¹⁵ For Harvey and Kidd, see the *ODNB*.

¹⁶ MS. D.D. Ewelme b. 2, fol. iii^v; printed in Cushing, *Life of Sir William Osler*, ii, 57–8.

¹⁷ Caroline Ticknor, in her article in *Scribner's Magazine*, records visiting Ewelme with Lady Osler in 1924 and being shown the bound volumes of muniments. In his 1940 biography of Osler Harvey Cushing refers to the muniments being on display, and records a meeting of the Oxford Architectural and Historical Society at Ewelme, at the invitation of the master 'when he learnedly discoursed on the foundation, respecting which he exhibited interesting munimentary information'.

¹⁸ They are available for study, with more recent material deposited by the Ewelme Trustees, as MSS. D.D. Ewelme.

¹⁹ Cushing, *Life of Sir William Osler*, ii, 58. During the fourteenth century gunpowder was effective mainly in scaring horses. See D. Seward, *The Hundred Years War, the English in France 1337-1453* (New York, 1978), pp. 65-6.

²⁰ John A. A. Goodall, *God's House at Ewelme*, pp. 159-97.

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