

## JOHN WHITE : THE CAMBRIDGESHIRE CONNECTION

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The diary kept between 29 December 1765 and 31 December 1767 by the Rev. William Cole FSA (1714-1782), Rector of Bletchley, Buckinghamshire, is one of the most endearing surviving accounts of the daily life of an eighteenth-century country clergyman, and the text of it, edited for publication in 1931 by F.G. Stokes<sup>1</sup>, has the additional bonus that it has a lengthy added introduction by Helen Waddell (1889-1965), a writer largely forgotten today but whose prose style has all the graces necessary to delight the reader.

Cole, a Cambridgeshire man and a graduate of Cambridge University, had remained in residence at King's College, Cambridge, for many years after taking his degree, and although he had been ordained as a clergyman in the mid 1740s, he had not performed regular Church of England duties before 1754, when he was presented to the rectory of Bletchley by its patron, Browne Willis (1682-1760), an elderly and irascible antiquary who will be familiar to numismatists as one of the earliest to make a serious collection of seventeenth century trade tokens.

The difficulty that confronted Cole in 1767 is that he had given a promise to Browne Willis that he would hand over the Bletchley living to Tom Willis, Browne Willis's grandson, if and when Tom Willis decided to take holy orders, which he did that summer. Although Browne Willis was by then long dead, Cole felt himself bound by his previous promise, and began to look around for a house where he could live, with or without clerical responsibilities, in the countryside close to Cambridge.

In this he sought help from Robert Masters, an university friend and contemporary, who was at the time Rector of Landbeach and Vicar of Waterbeach, two adjacent villages a few miles north of Cambridge. Masters, who lived at Landbeach and not at Waterbeach, offered Cole a lease of the unoccupied vicarage at Waterbeach, where, as Cole puts it in his diary, "coals & fish are cheap, and Cambridge near", on the basis that Cole would also act as his curate there. Unfortunately the vicarage was in a dilapidated state, and Masters was clearly somewhat reluctant to pay for the repairs to it that would be necessary before Cole could move in, so Masters drew Cole's attention to "a more convenient modern house" in Waterbeach, "belonging to a tradesman in London", which Cole might rent instead.

As it turned out, this house belonged to John White (died 1787), the London-based coin dealer and notorious coin forger, and Cole's diary entry for 13 August 1767, of which the relevant part is reproduced in full below, reveals the less than satisfactory condition of the house in question. By naming a Cambridge-based nephew of White's, Cole also provides a clue to White's family background which should enable a future scholar to improve significantly on the biographical account of White compiled by Harry Manville for the relevant volume of his *Encyclopaedia of British Numismatics*<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> F.G. Stokes (ed), *The Blecheley Diary of the Rev. William Cole M.A. F.S.A. 1765-67*, London, Constable & Co. Ltd, 1931.

<sup>2</sup> H.E. Manville, *Biographical Dictionary of British and Irish Numismatics* (Encyclopaedia of British Numismatics vol. IV), 2009, 309-10.

Here is the diary entry :

Tuesd: 13. Sent Tom [Wood] to Cambridge to enquire for a L[ette]r from Mr White who owned the house at Waterbeche, & to call on my Aunt, Mrs Cock, who was pretty well. L[ette]r from Mr White, who happens to be the Person to whom I presented some years ago an Electrum British Coin, & who sent me very handsomely several Norman-Anglo coins of our first Kings of that Race: he is an ingenious Tradesman & Hatter in the wholesale way in Newgate Street. He mentioned nothing of selling it, but was willing to let it at £7 per an. & I to pay the Water Tax : his Nephew Mr Smith the Cabinet Maker of Cambridge near Trinity College, (whose Father & Grandfather I knew), came over in the Afternoon & rode over with Mr Masters & myself, 1 on one of my Coach Horses, to look at the House, which was much out of Repair & a shocking Place. We wanted him to repair it : he offered a Year's Rent : that would not do by a 4<sup>th</sup> part to fit it up properly, as there was a whole Kitchin to be new tiled, a side wall taken down & rebuilt, a necessary House to be built, Fences to be made, Partitions above Stairs & many other Things to be done. I offered to take a Lease for 4 years if he would do the necessary Repairs, & I to paint it, fit up several Things in the Inside & for the Stable, which was to be made in the Barn. He was to write to his Uncle on Sunday & would acquaint Mr Masters with his Determination.

Cole was to hear nothing further until a little over a month later, when, as his diary entry for 16 September 1767 recounts :

No L[ette]r from Mr [Tom] Willis, but one from Mr Masters to inform me that I could not have Mr White's House at Waterbeche, except I would pay the Water Tax, & I build up all Conveniences, even Stables, Coach House & Necessary House & repair & Paper & Paint the whole House & make the Fences, for which he would only allow 3 pounds : so he [Mr Masters] is fitting up the Vicarage House for me, but expects me to allow Part of the Expençe.

It can be seen from this abortive negotiation between Cole and White that White had a keen eye for his own personal advantage, and it was no doubt a good result for Cole that he was never to become White's tenant.

Beyond this, recognition that White had Cambridgeshire and Cambridge connections has led me to the further discovery that the archives of Cambridge City Council and Cambridgeshire County Council contain various documents listed on the internet that are likely to shed a good deal of light on White's meaningful property holdings in Cambridge and in its vicinity, and these should certainly be of use to future researchers.

As regards White's career in numismatics, White, a straw hat vendor by trade, had started out just as a coin collector, but soon discovered that there was money to be made from acting as a coin dealer, and further profit to be made both from marketing casts taken from genuine coins and from marketing coins which were in themselves genuine but on which the inscriptions had been tooled to make them appear more interesting to collectors. He may seem a figure from a distant past, but he has left evidence directly connecting us with him in the shape of his surviving personal manuscript catalogue of his collection of coins in the English mediaeval and early modern series as it existed in 1752 (see the description of this by Harry Manville in his *Encyclopaedia* volume).

I myself possess a slim volume, divinely ex the Cuff sale, 1854, lot 2401, which contains eight eighteenth century priced and named catalogues of coin sales held by the Langford firm of auctioneers, ranging in date from the catalogue of the collection of Ebenezer Mussell, 11-16 February 1765, to the catalogue of the collection of coins, medals, engraving tools, and so on, formed by Richard Yeo, Chief Engraver of the Mint, 2-3 February 1780. In this volume both the Mussell catalogue and the Yeo catalogue are evidently John White's own copies, carrying ink markings in his hand. The Yeo catalogue carries on its last page a list in ink of the four lots which White purchased at the sale, for a total cost of £8 14s., and a note by White indicates that one of these lots, lot 61 on the first day of the sale, described in the catalogue as containing 'A guinea [of George III], blank, with new pattern for milling, and an half guinea', was purchased by him for Dr William Hunter. It would be pleasing if this provides a provenance for a coin identifiable in the Hunterian Museum, Glasgow, today.

Additionally, as Brad Shepherd has very kindly checked for me, John White's copy of *Museum Thoresbyanum*, the auction catalogue for the celebrated coin collection made by Ralph Thoresby (1658-1725) and sold by the auctioneer Whiston Bristow 5-7 March 1764, survives in the joint RNS/BNS Library held in the Warburg Institute, London. It is inscribed "Mr Jno White" at the top right-hand corner of its title leaf.



