

## THE SANCROFTS.

BY REV. JOHN JAMES RAVEN, D.D.,

Vicar of Fressingfield with Withersdale.

and Honorary Canon of Norwich Cathedral.

---

*(Read before the Members of the Institute, June 8, 1888.)*

---

“Sword and Gown” might form a fitting title to sketches of the notables of the parishes of Wingfield and Fressingfield. In succession to the warriors of the former parish come the scholars of the latter.

The earliest notice of the Sancrofts which we possess shows the name to be of local origin. The account of a charter granted, probably in the time of Henry III., by Adam le Bavent, son of Roger le Bavent, Knight, to Henry, son of William of Sandcroft, and Margery his wife, and his heirs, a certain message in the parish of Fressingfield, in the hamlet of Chebendale, shows us that there was somewhere a sandy croft where William’s progenitors had dwelt. In a country where so many fields have their names, and as a consequence a man who lived close by some croft might take his name from it, none can speak positively as to the origin of a name. Yet the old parish of Southelmham S. George, otherwise Sandcroft, where the sandy loam shows itself by reason of the denudation of the upper clay seems pre-eminently likely to be the spot from which came so many generations of Fressingfield yeomen, of whom two after a while attained to high academical and ecclesiastical distinction. Judicious marriages with co-heiresses and daughters of men of substance appear to have strengthened the house in possession and position. We will, however, skip some two generations, and begin with one William Sancroft, who in

September, 1578, married at Hoxne, Alice, daughter of John Stokes, of Drenkeston.

The eldest and second sons from this marriage, Francis and William by name, were baptised at Withersdale in 1580 and 1582 respectively; and it is through the pains of the latter that we know these facts. The Fressingfield register begins in 1554. This industrious William Sancroft made a fair copy of it on parchment, getting each page attested by John Rawlins, vicar, and James Wollnough and John Crickmer, churchwardens, to the year 1598, when the boy was 16 years of age. He inserts family notes from other parishes in this copy of the register, which has given a special value to the document.

Emmanuel College, Cambridge, was founded when he was two years old. Thither he went up in October, 1596, and won for himself a name among no contemptible men. Lawrence Chaderton, one of the translators of the Bible, was then in the zenith of his fame as Master of the College, not only a great scholar, but a great teacher and preacher. Bishops Hall and Bedell, both names connected with East Anglia, had already come forth from Emmanuel. William Sancroft became a Fellow in 1604, and in the course of 24 years, being now Senior Fellow, was elected to the Mastership on the death of Dr. John Preston, author of the *New Covenant*, a well-known preacher of the day. Letters from other members of the Society still exist, showing the great anxiety felt in the College that the choice of a successor to Preston should rest upon Sancroft. In 1629 he was created D.D., and having held the Mastership nine years, he died at Bury S. Edmund's, and was buried at S. Mary's in that town, April 20th, 1637.

Like all industrious men, he has left his mark wherever he lived. The painstaking transcript of the Fressingfield register was the prelude to greater works at Cambridge. He had been Master of the College about four years when the scant room at Emmanuel, and the full entry, induced the society to construct a new range of buildings, in order to keep all the men within college. A very picturesque

block is this old red-brick building, dear to many an Emmanuel man. The design, however, seems to have been better than the execution, to judge from subsequent reports of it, and the tradesmen hardly to have merited the liberality with which the College treated them. Dr. Sancroft appears to have been a stranger in Bury, where he died, perhaps from some illness contracted on his way from Fressingfield to Cambridge, to keep the May Term. He is entered as "Mr. Jo. Sancroft, Dor. of Divinitie." No slab or other memorial to him can be found at the place of his sepulture.

During his tenure of the Mastership, two nephews came up from Fressingfield, sons of the elder brother Francis, to wit, Thomas and William. The stay of Thomas at the seat of learning was brief. Perhaps he did not "profit at his book." At any rate, we hear nothing further of him in the University. Our interest will centre on the younger nephew, William, born in 1616, and baptized in Fressingfield Church by John Rawlins, then vicar of the parish. A gap of precisely two months separates the entries of the two brothers in the Emmanuel register, Thomas on July 10th, William on September 10th, 1633. Philip Cornwaleys, of Suffolk, probably a Wingfield neighbour, was nearing the end of his course. Roger Farmer, whose name would have well nigh perished had it not been for the tablet to his memory in Alstonfield Church, Staffordshire, had kept one term. That "Godly gentleman and lover of learning," John Harvard, of Middlesex, was still to be seen at times in the College, for he did not proceed to his M.A. till 1635. I need say nothing of Harvard, but as our Transatlantic brethren are naturally anxious for any items about the men of that time I note that Roger Farmer must have died soon after his institution to Alstonfield. He is described as a pious and faithful preacher, and his death as a happy one. No trace of him is known beyond his monument in the old church in Dovedale, where Cotton's pew remains, where Isaac Walton worshipped. I am content to give this

passing tribute to the memory of one who could not fail to have been Archbishop Sancroft's friend. He died March 15th, 1682, and was buried two days after his death. Emmanuel, with its strict manners and high reputation for learning, must have been a suitable College for the studious son of a country gentleman of small estate. Such a gentleman was Mr. Francis Sancroft, whose assessment for Fressingfield in the Subsidy Roll for 1641 was £15, and his payment £2. In 1637 William Sancroft took his degree, being placed at the head of the Junior Optimes, a term which may bear explanation. An act, or public disputation, was then a necessary exercise for any degree. When it was creditably performed, the presiding officer would say, "Optime disputasti, domine," whereas "Bene disputasti," had to suffice for the less successful. Before the days of Archbishop Sancroft's undergraduateship, these "Optimes" were arranged in two classes, seniors and juniors. This system continued till 1753, when a further division of the upper class took place, the designation "Wrangler," which hitherto had been a convertible term with "Senior Optime," being reserved for the highest of the three classes now formed. The classification thus made is that which remains to this day.

The death of his uncle, the Master of Emmanuel, about this time, did not materially interfere with his progress, the new master, Dr. Holdsworth, taking a kindly interest in the young man, who proceeded M.A. in 1641, served the office of Bursar in 1644, and subsequently that of Tutor. But trouble was at hand. As early as 1642, Sancroft writes to his father, "Things go very ill above, prayers and tears are the best arms we can use, and I pray God we may stay there and take no other." Dr. Holdsworth took the king's side, fell into prison, remained there four years, and died, broken-hearted, though at large, about seven months after the execution of Charles I. It may be taken for certain, from extant letters, that the Solemn League and Covenant was not offered to William

Sancroft, whose escape was probably due to his studious habits. A lively proof of these we have in a letter of his to his father, dated September, 1641, wherein he says, "I pray, sir, send me the winter gown faced with fur, which I wore sometimes when I was at home last, for I purpose, if it please God to bless me with health, to sit close at my study this winter, and not to stir any whither." Fressingfield was clearly no place for the young man. Our vicar, Mr. James Fale, a fine scholar, if his handwriting may be sponsor for his learning, was ejected apparently in 1643 (his latest entry in the register before ejection is February 16th, 1642-3, but the evidence is complicated by his having kept a private paper register, which no longer exists), and Mr. Francis Sancroft was buried February 21st, 1648-9. We find the dutiful and affectionate son present at his father's burial. The entry of the burial is in Mr. Fale's handwriting, but evidently made after date, and William Sancroft's allusion to "sitting long in the church," seems rather to point to a Puritan improvement of the occasion than to the psalm and lesson of the office for the Burial of the Dead. The precise dates are instructive, as showing how things were managed. "His tender sense and apprehension of the public calamities, together with the burthen of 68 years, and a violent fever, with which it pleased God to visit him, have ended the life in which all ours were bound up. On Sunday night (February 18th—not three weeks after the king's execution), about ten of the clock, he went hence; yesternight (February 19th), at eight, I made hard shift to get hither" are the words of William Sancroft to his friend Holdsworth, fellow of Emmanuel. A horseman could hardly have started before midnight. Riding through the Fressingfield woodlands, and by Hoxne, Scole Inn, Botesdale, Ixworth, Bury, Saxham White Horse, Kentford Cock, Newmarket, and Bottisham Swan, he would not have put in at the Bird Bolt, opposite Emmanuel, before nine in the morning, considering the time of the year and the probable state of the roads.

The return by carriage was more tardy, and the hardness of the shift by which son William made his presence in the sorrowing family circle may easily be realized. It seems to have been a walking funeral. Thus we pass from Squire Francis to go on with William's history, he had already proceeded B.D. in the previous year, and completed his divinity course by being created D.D. in 1653. Now he had been expelled from his fellowship by August 13th, 1651. How the Doctorate was achieved I know not. After his expulsion he was for some time at Triplow, and then at his brother's at Fressingfield, where he found it dull. Writing to Mr. North, June 27th, 1655, he says, "From hence you cannot expect I should tell you anything, but that I have here thick shades and cool walks, but no company in them, except that of my own thoughts." In 1657 he went to Holland, made a short stay at Amsterdam, and a longer one at Utrecht, and in July, 1659, started with his friend Robert Gayer for a southward journey. But his heart was at Fressingfield. He writes to his brother Thomas of his hope one day to return and find his last home at his father's feet. The tour was by Spa, Maestricht, Geneva, Venice, and Padua, to Rome, where he received the news of the coming Restoration, and turned his face homewards. When Cosin, whom he had generously befriended in the dark days of the Commonwealth, became Bishop of Durham, Sancroft received a Prebendal stall in that Cathedral; and as Clerk to Convocation in the Province of Canterbury entered all the alterations made in the Book of Common Prayer at the revision of 1662 with his own hand into the sealed book. Among these were a Collect, Epistle, and Gospel for the Sixth Sunday after Epiphany, and it is remarkable that in the east wall of the south porch, just over the Archbishop's grave are words from the Gospel; and I find from Mr. Kershaw, the Librarian at Lambeth, that they are included in the Archbishop's written directions about his tomb. It is not for me to tell again the story of his fortunes as Dean of S. Paul's when the old Cathedral was burnt down,

or as a dutiful member of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, to rehearse his benefactions to the College, of which he was successively Scholar, Fellow, and Master. Burnet tells us that he was preferred to Canterbury on the strength of his being a sedentary man who would not interfere with the Court. Never was a more signal mistake made. As Archbishop of Canterbury, he was Visitor of All Souls' College, Oxford, and how nobly he helped to fight and win the battle of justice and learning against court corruption, may be read in Professor Montagu Burrows's *Worthies of All Souls*. This is not the occasion to tell again of the trial of the Seven Bishops, or of the non-juring schism.

I must draw this brief sketch to a close. His refusal of the oaths to William and Mary brought about his deprivation and expulsion from Lambeth. He had now passed the three score years and ten, and seems to have been much broken by his troubles. From a letter of his now in the possession of the Rev. C. R. Manning, he was driven in the spring of 1691 from his obscure lodging in Lambeth by the tidings that the Sheriff of Surrey had a writ for his attachment, and, on hastily crossing to the Middlesex side of the water, found himself occupant of two wretched rooms near the Temple, which could be looked through by the barber living opposite, whom he describes as a violent bigot. Here a mysterious stranger visited the old man (either a hypocritical traitor or a dangerous plotter), and endeavoured to draw him into a conspiracy against the Government. But however earnestly the deprived Archbishop might desire the overthrow of the Orange *regime*, he was not to be drawn into any action. His answer, as he records it, was "in any circumstance I am very unfitt to enter into any Business of this nature; for I ev'ry Hour expected a New Attachm't directed to ye Sheriff of Middlxs to seize me; and therf. resolv'd forthwith to leave the City, and go almost 100 miles off into ye deepest Retirem't I could find." He came to Fressingfield on Aug. 5, 1691, and how he lived there may be read in D'Oyly's Life. I

remember one letter addressed to him, preserved in the Tanner MSS., which throws a light on the feelings of the district. Mr. Glover, a staunch Jacobite, living at Frostenden, wrote to the Archbishop, asking him to confirm his daughter in his own chapel at Fressingfield, as he could not endure the thought of the rite being performed by the "intruding" Bishop of Norwich, Dr. Moore. The request was probably granted. On the 25th of August, 1693, he was seized with a violent fever, in which he lingered three months, bearing his pain with great patience, and, affectionate to his College to the last, he sent thither all his books in the earlier days of his illness. The letter of Dr. Balderston, Master of Emmanuel, returning thanks for his Grace's munificence, yet remains in the Tanner Collection. Firm to his political principles within an hour of his end, he denounced the Revolution, and prayed for the restoration of the unhappy sovereign from whom he had received little but injustice and cruelty. Then calling for a Prayer-book, he turned to the commendatory prayer, ordered it to be read, and cheerfully breathed his last shortly after midnight, on the morning of Friday, Nov. 24th, 1693. The entry of the burial in the hand of his own nominee, the Rev. John Shephard, Vicar of Fressingfield; reads thus:—"The most Reverend Dr. William Sancroft, Lord Archbishop of Canterbury, was buried November 27th. Affidavit made before Mr. Turner, December 3d."