

THE PURITAN CONNEXIONS OF
SIR EDWARD ALSTON, PRESIDENT OF
THE ROYAL COLLEGE OF PHYSICIANS 1655–1666

by

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SIR EDWARD ALSTON was the son of Edward Alston senior and descended from a family that had lived and held land in Suffolk since the days of Edward III.¹ Edward Alston senior has been variously identified with either Edwardstone or Boxford in Suffolk. Topographically, these tiny villages are virtually inseparable. American readers will perhaps remember that Edwardstone was the birthplace, in 1588, of John Winthrop, the first Governor of Massachusetts. Indeed, it is apparent from the diary of his father, Adam Winthrop, that the lives of the Winthrops and Alstons, were closely bound.

Carefully noted by the elder Winthrop were all the petty transactions that made up the life of these Suffolk landowners. The entry of 15 April 1595 was typical of the relationship between Adam Winthrop and Edward Alston: "Item I bought of Mr. [Edward] Alston the XVth of April 1595 a grey Colt xl s."² On other occasions Adam Winthrop noted the sale of peas to Alston or the renting of a cart and plough to his neighbour. Often, the two men would exchange their roles of creditor and debtor and Winthrop has a few entries to remind him of money which he owed to Alston. References to dealings between the families spanned the generations and in 1628 John Winthrop reported the death of Peter Alston, perhaps the grandson of Edward Alston senior, of Edwardstone.

The interests of the Winthrops in the Alstons were by no means limited to business. On 21 April 1595 Adam Winthrop announced the marriage of Edward "Aulston" to Susan Brand of Sudbury, about five miles to the west of Edwardstone. This is soon followed by a more tragic note on 5 December 1595: "Susan Bronde the wyfe of Edward Aulston died of childbed".³ The child involved in this misfortune may have been the future President of the Royal College of Physicians of London, Sir Edward Alston. All the sources seem to agree that he was a native of Suffolk, but there is a discrepancy among them in the date of his birth. *The Dictionary of National Biography* does in fact list 1595, but on what basis it is impossible to ascertain.⁴ The author of the article, Sir Norman Moore, was deeply versed in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century medical history and his conclusion, even though lacking documentary substantiation, cannot be dismissed lightly. The antiquarian Musgrave, in his *Obituary*, recorded the clearly correct date of death as 1669, but gave the age at death as seventy-one.⁵ Indirectly then, Musgrave has suggested 1598 as Sir Edward Alston's birth

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year. On 8 December 1624, he married Susan Hudson, a widow and the daughter of Christopher Hudson of Norwich. On that occasion the marriage licence read, "Alston, Edward, gent., of St. Mary Abchurch, London, bachelor, 28".⁶ This information, therefore, suggests a third possible birth-date, 1596. However, Alston himself has testified against the years 1598 and 1596. In 1633 he informed the Heralds of the College of Arms that his mother was "Margaret da. of Arthur Penning of Kettleborough co. Suffolk".⁷ The London visitation of 1664 indicated that Margaret Penning was the mother of Joseph and Penning Alston, two prominent Londoners, as well as of Dr. Edward Alston.⁸ It is at this point that Adam Winthrop's *Diary* becomes invaluable when it informs us that Edward Alston senior almost certainly re-married in 1596, for on 24 June 1597 ("A festo Johannis Baptiste"), "The same day Edward Aulston his wife was d[elivere]d of hir first sonne".⁹ If Sir Edward Alston was born in 1598, the age given at his marriage becomes more difficult to understand unless we posit 1597 as his true birth-date. It is not unlikely that at the age of 27½ in 1624 he would have given the age of twenty-eight to the licensing authorities. Thus, at his death in 1669 Sir Edward Alston would have been seventy-two, not seventy-one.

In 1633, Edward Alston junior, by this reckoning a family man of thirty-six who had recently been elected a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians, referred to his father as "of Edwardstone". In 1605 and 1606, Adam Winthrop associated Edward Alston senior with Boxford, Suffolk. On at least one occasion I have seen Edwardstone referred to as Edwardstone "nigh Boxford", indicating the closeness of the two localities.^{9a} The identification of the elder Alston with Edwardstone in 1633 may therefore have been somewhat arbitrary. Nonetheless, prior to his matriculation as a pensioner from St. John's College, Cambridge, in 1612, Sir Edward Alston's earliest years must have been spent either solely in Boxford, or in Boxford and the neighbouring Edwardstone.¹⁰ Between 1600 and 1624, official religion here was primarily in the hands of the rector of Boxford, Joseph Bird. Suffolk was an intensely Puritan county in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and Boxford was no exception. In 1584, Henry Sandes of Boxford, "Preacher of the word of God", was among those suspended for not subscribing to the Articles of Archbishop Whitgift.¹¹ Joseph Bird (M.A. of Trinity College, Cambridge, 1591) seems to have continued in the tradition of Sandes. The fervent Puritan, Adam Winthrop, was an approving auditor of his sermons as witnessed by the entry he made in his diary on 5 August 1603: "Mr. [Joseph] Birde preached at Boxforde upon the 124 psalme, pie et docte". In 1620, Winthrop was still listening to Bird's sermons, as well as those of the minister's son. The rector's puritanism is confirmed by Adam Winthrop's note on 17 September 1613:

There mett at Mr. Sands, Mr. Knewstubbs, Mr. Birde and his wife, Mr. Chambers, John Garrold and his wife, John Warner and his wife, Mr. Stebbin Barker of the pryorye, and I with my company, where we appointed all to meete again the next year on that frydaye which should be nearest to the 17 of September, and in the meane tyme every of us eache fryday in the week to be mindefull one of another in desiring God to grante his petitions that were made to him that daye.¹²

There is, of course, nothing in this unassailably to indicate the religious predilections of Edward Alston or his son. However, it must be borne in mind that the distance

between Edwardstone and Boxford being a mere mile and three-quarters, the relationship between neighbours was close and personal. The daily contact with the zealous Winthrops, as well as the intense puritanism of the locality would have been hard to resist, particularly by a rather prominent "ancient" family, which was so tightly bound up with the community. At the very least, it would have been difficult for the Alstons not to pay a measure of lip service to the deeply held religious views of Winthrop or of Joseph Bird, even if they did not share their convictions, which seems unlikely.

It was within this atmosphere that Sir Edward Alston passed his first fifteen years before going up to Cambridge in 1612. The religious background may account for his family's decision to send him to St. John's. Although undergoing educational decline and passing through a repression of puritanism within its quarters, this was still the school of Cartwright and Whitaker and, in 1609, it elected the Suffolk puritan, Richard Sibbes, as its preacher. Among the chief luminaries of the college at the time of Alston's entry was John Williams, soon to emerge as the most puritan of bishops and Archbishop William Laud's enemy.

Evidence drawn from the later life of Sir Edward Alston seems to confirm that not only did he grow up surrounded by intense puritan influences, but that in all likelihood he was deeply affected by them. One of the few direct indications of Alston's religious feelings is in Edward Reynolds' funeral oration for Lady Mary Langham, Alston's daughter. Lady Mary, according to the future Bishop of Norwich (himself a moderate Puritan), "looked after Heaven very young; would frequently bless God for the religious Education which she had under her parents . . . She was a woman mighty in Scriptures".¹³ Further reference to Alston's religious beliefs is more indirect. By 1647, he was one of the wealthiest physicians in England and able, in that year, to supply a handsome dowry to the elder of his two children, Mary, for her marriage to James Langham, son of the London Turkey merchant John Langham. Official accounts of the Langham family are scrupulously devoid of any specific reference to Puritanism or revolutionary fervour.¹⁴ Yet, Valerie Pearl has discovered John Langham to be among those members of London City government whom she classifies as "parliamentary puritans" and "staunch political presbyterians".¹⁵ In 1660, with most of England, the Langhams joyously greeted the return of Charles II. However, the fact remains that when John Langham took the oath as an alderman for Portsoken Ward on 12 May 1642 he had, perhaps reluctantly, committed himself to the Parliamentary cause.¹⁶ His son and Alston's son-in-law, James Langham, sat for the family's native Northamptonshire, a country suffused with as much Puritanism as Suffolk, during the period 1656–58 and for Northampton in 1659. Financially, the family prospered during the Interregnum and by the Restoration Sir John Langham was one of the great merchants of England.

The case for Sir Edward Alston's Puritan connexions is even more clearly established by the marriage of his youngest daughter, Sarah. In 1652, with a dowry as handsome as that of her sister, Sarah Alston was married to George Grimston, a son of Harbottle Grimston. The active role played by the puritanical Grimston in the Long Parliament is well known and need not be recounted. In passing, a few similarities between the Langhams and Grimstons might be noted in order to illuminate

the politics and religion of Sir Edward Alston. Both families were composed of dedicated Parliamentarians, continually at odds with Cromwell and the Army. Their social position almost inevitably made them distrust the revolution after 1646 and they were active promoters of Monck's restoration of the king, who rewarded their efforts with knighthoods and baronetcies. The affluence and position they enjoyed after 1660 was disturbed only by their violent anti-papal outbursts on behalf of Whiggery. The Restoration also brought knighthoods, baronetcies, increased wealth and growing social position to the Alstons. Coincidentally, all three men, Sir John Langham, Sir Harbottle Grimston, and Sir Edward Alston made public addresses to the returned monarch that were generally received as excessively adulatory and even "servile". Perhaps they all felt a certain guilt that they had too readily acquiesced to the Parliamentary cause and to the circumstances that brought about Cromwell's Protectorate.

During the Interregnum, Alston played an important role in guiding the affairs of the Royal College of Physicians. Adept in financial matters, he served as the College's Treasurer from 1649 to 1654, and as its President from 1655 to 1666. As Munk has observed, Alston had to cope with many disorders in the College occasioned by political disturbances: funds nearly exhausted; lectures suspended; physicians practising within the liberty of the College without licence; and the discontinuation of the examination of apothecaries' apprentices.¹⁷ In the early years of the Restoration Alston managed to increase the funds of the College to a high level and resolved some of its legal problems by creating by College statute the new status of Honorary Fellow. He thereby incorporated into the College seventy physicians who had practised during the Rebellion without licence. With the Puritan background and Parliamentary sympathies we have postulated, Alston was in an excellent position to serve as a conciliator for the Restoration Royal College. Sadly, these important achievements were somewhat tarnished by the College's behaviour during the Great Plague of 1665, the robbery of its treasure chest and the petty disputes which finally forced Alston, near the end of his life, to sever all ties with the institution which he had done so much to preserve.

This brief sketch enables us to understand, in part, how a "royal" college could survive intact through the middle years of the seventeenth century. A number of prominent physicians like William Harvey and Sir Matthew Lister were less able to reach a compromise with the Parliamentarians and it is doubtful whether a London institution composed entirely of devoted Royalists and high Anglicans would or could have been allowed to exist through the Civil War and its aftermath. Fortunately for the College, there were men within it, like Alston, who were able to adapt to the circumstances without too great a strain on their consciences. It was these men, both within and outside the College, often Puritan in background but with an extraordinary talent for compromise and statesmanship, upon whom the Restoration depended. To the names of Downing, Petty, Monck and Montagu must now be added the name of Sir Edward Alston.

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