

## Botanist, Warden, Lunatic: ‘The Fatal Prepossession’ (New College MS 382) in Context

In April 2024 I acquired from a West Country antiquarian bookdealer a late eighteenth-century holograph manuscript volume, produced in the West Country by a celebrated New College fellow also hailing from that region. A gilt-tooled, tree-calf bound quarto volume, its 113 paper leaves contain in a cursive script (appearance indicates a fair copy) three apparently unpublished literary works by him—and one since published—dedicated to the warden of New College, Oxford. Principally, the volume contains a five-act play by the author, ‘The Fatal Prepossession, a Tragedy’, accounting for most of the volume, followed by three verse compositions. (Everything is penned on the leaves’ rectos, apart from the odd stage direction on a verso.) ‘Celadon and Cornelia. A Ballad’ comprises 43 stanzas, and is dated 17 March 1785, then there are two shorter pieces in rhyming couplets, his 14-stanza ‘Elegy on the death of Werter’ dated September 1784, and an ‘Elegy. Addressed by the Author to his father’ dated December 1784. The shortest of these, the Werter elegy, would subsequently appear in the September 1786 issue of *The European Magazine, and London Review* under the initials ‘C. A.’<sup>1</sup> The author of this volume?—now New College MS 382—the botanist, the Revd Dr Charles Abbot (1761–1817).

Charles Abbot was born in Blandford, Dorset on 24 March 1761, and was educated at Winchester College as a scholar from 1772, before proceeding to New College as a scholar in 1779, graduating BA in 1783. In the year, 1785, when he wrote the very special volume which our library now holds, Abbot was already a fellow (1781–8) of college, though perhaps not a fellow with the finest of reputations. The volume was evidently a dedication volume and gift—a fairly obsequious one at that—to the college warden of the time, and no doubt presented to him. On the first substantive leaf of the manuscript, Abbot has written, in an attractive layout and hand:

To the Reverend / JOHN OGLANDER D.D. / Warden of New-College, / Oxford,  
/ The following Pages are most humbly inscribed / by his most obliged, and / most  
obedient Servant, / Charles Abbot.<sup>2</sup>

The ‘Dedicatory Address’ that follows—bearing the colophon ‘Great Malvern / Worcestershire / March. 23. 1785’—provides a rationale for the gift and the author’s labour in producing it:

In my last year’s retirement from College, I have been charged very unworthily with giving way to Idleness and Extravagance.—Idleness is the child of expense.—If therefore the perusal of the inclosed work should undo the first charge, I should hope that in ingenious minds it would defeat the ill consequences of the latter.—

If it has this effect on you, and should conciliate your esteem (which I am aware some persons in my absence have endeavoured to rob me of) my desire is fully gratified.<sup>3</sup>

Ostensibly, Abbot was seeking to disabuse Warden Oglander of any damaging, if not fatal, prepossession or prejudice that he now might otherwise have been victim of, on account of wagging tongues. The warden had, indeed, previously ‘condescended to patronise the first effort of my pen’, suggesting that Abbot had some experience as a literary writer, and providing one of several obvious reasons why the author would have wanted to restore his own good name.<sup>4</sup>

Four years ago, I obtained for the library an exceedingly rare—and author’s presentation—copy of Charles Abbot’s published *Verses* (1802), dedicatory poetry to the memory of another man, the late Francis Russell, 5th duke of Bedford. But it is as a botanist and entomologist, and not as

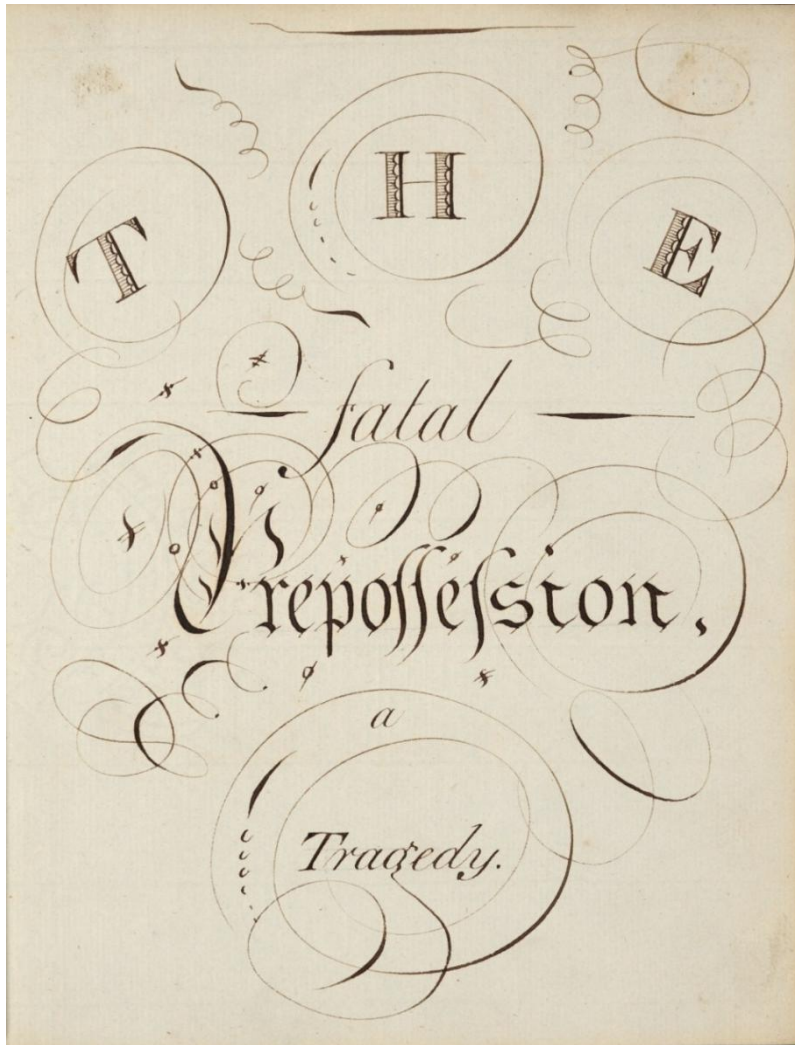
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<sup>1</sup> C. A., ‘Elegy On the Death of Werter’, *The European Magazine, and London Review* 10 (September 1786), 214.

<sup>2</sup> New College Library, Oxford, MS 382, f. 2r.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, ff. 3r, 4r.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, f. 3r.



New College Library, Oxford, MS 382, f. 5r (title-page)  
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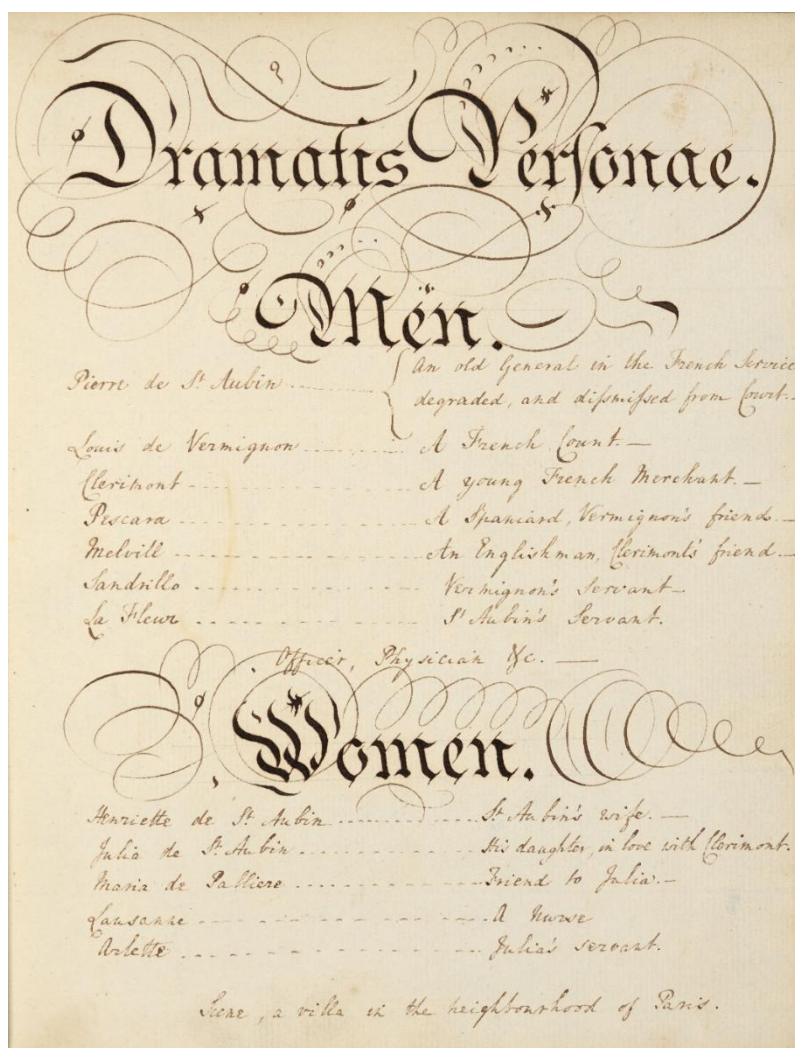
a literary author, that Abbot is renowned today. His fame rests chiefly on his *Flora Bedfordiensis* (1798), a copy of which our library also holds; it is the third English county flora to be published in Britain after those for Cambridgeshire and Oxfordshire, but the earliest produced in English.<sup>5</sup> Illustrated with six woodcuts, it provides descriptions of some 1,325 plants and ferns, utilising Linnean classification.

Abbot married Sarah Harris in 1787 in the parish of Leigh with Bransford, a few miles from Great Malvern, the same year he received the life appointment from New College (as was tradition) as usher, i.e. assistant master, of Bedford School. He appears to have been unenthusiastic about his schoolmaster duties; admittedly, his annual starting salary of just £20 (with a house and stable) was meagre, and his career at Bedford School would be singularly lacking in distinction. Abbot would feel bitterly aggrieved at being passed over for the role of headmaster when, in 1811, the Revd Dr John Brereton (1782–1862)—like Abbot, a Winchester and New College scholar, but much Abbot's junior in years—was instead appointed to the headship. Abbot proved truculently uncooperative, as Brereton managed nonetheless to reform and expand the school for the better.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Charles Abbot, *Verses Sacred to the Memory of the Most Noble Francis Duke of Bedford, who died March the 2d. 1802* (Bedford: W. Smith, 1802), and his *Flora Bedfordiensis, Comprehending Such Plants as Grow Wild in the County of Bedford* (Bedford: W. Smith, 1798), in New College Library, Oxford, at our shelfmarks NB.134.20 and BT3.205.12, respectively.

<sup>6</sup> John G. Dony, 'A Bedfordshire Botanist and Schoolmaster', *Bedfordshire Magazine* 11 (1967), 69–72, and 'The Early History of Bedford School (Concluded)', *The Ousel* [the journal of Bedford School] 26 (1922), 132–3.

As a botanist, Abbot is known too for his herbarium, though most of the work of its preparation fell to Sarah his wife, an exceedingly skilful helpmate. In 1798 he would make the first recording in Britain (in Clapham Wood) of the chequered skipper butterfly. He was elected a fellow of the Linnean Society in 1793, and received his Doctor of Divinity degree from Oxford in 1802. He held various Church of England appointments—rector at St Mary's, Bedford (he published a volume of hymns he wrote for this church in 1791),<sup>7</sup> and at St Cuthbert's, Bedford, then vicar of Oakley Raynes and afterwards of Goldington (both near Bedford). Charles Abbot died in Bedford on 8 September 1817, disillusioned and alienated in his Bedford School role, but having arranged to be buried back in the West Country, in a plot with his beloved wife who predeceased him (they were childless) at the Priory Church in Great Malvern.<sup>8</sup>



New College Library, Oxford, MS 382, f. 6r (list of characters)—also written with considerable care

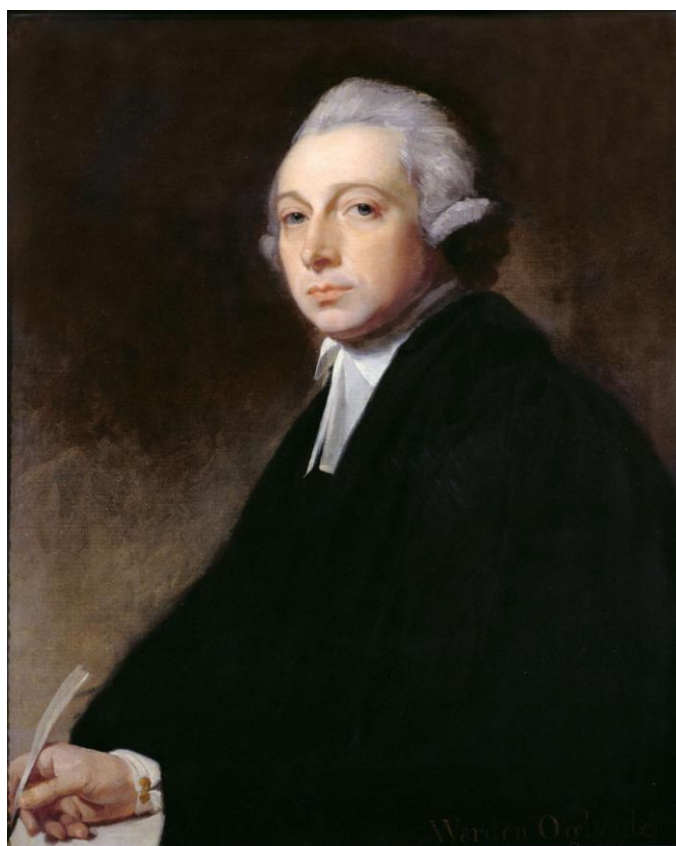
A dedicatory manuscript volume to a New College warden, containing, in our celebrated scientist alumnus Charles Abbot's painstaking hand, his unpublished play (and other of his literary

<sup>7</sup> Charles Abbot, *Hymns Composed for the Use of St. Mary's Church, in the Town of Bedford* (Bedford: W. Smith, 1791).

<sup>8</sup> Enid Slatter, 'Some Noteworthy Early British Floras and their Diverse Authors', *The Linnean* 14 (2) (1998), 20–24, at p. 24. Other biographical accounts include: Chris R. Boon, 'Charles Abbot—Bedfordshire's First Botanist', *Bedfordshire Magazine* 26 (1998), 240–43, J. G. Dony, 'Bedfordshire Naturalists: III—Charles Abbot (1761–1817)', *The Bedfordshire Naturalist: Being the Journal of the Bedfordshire Natural History Society and Field Club* 3 (1948), 38–42, and Enid Slatter, 'Abbot, Charles (1761–1817)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (27 May 2010) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/2>> (Accessed: 12 December 2024).

writings), makes for a significant acquisition for the library, and an interesting document on our college’s institutional history. So, what do we know of the warden for whom this volume was produced?

John Oglander (1737–1794), baptised 26 September 1737, was born the second son of Sir John Oglander (1704–1767), 4th Baronet of Nunwell, whose family seat Nunwell House (or ‘Nunwell Manor’) was at Brading on the Isle of Wight. Several Oglander men have been associated with our college, though none more so than this one. A scholar at Winchester College from 1752, and—after matriculating at St John’s College, Oxford—he was later a scholar too at New College (BA 1761, MA 1765, BD 1770, DD 1774), assuming the wardenship here on 19 August 1768, in which role he remained until his death on 13 January 1794. He also held Church of England positions, appointed rector of Down St Mary Church in Devon in 1763, and at Colerne, Wiltshire in 1772, as well as a canon at Chichester Cathedral in 1768. Only at the comparatively late age of 39 did he get married, on 20 November 1776 at St Mary’s, Marylebone (the bride’s parish), to a 19-year-old Jane Mary Rayne—a ‘minor’ in those days, thus requiring the consent of her father, the Revd Thomas Rayne (1715–1789), vicar of Netherbury, Dorset.<sup>9</sup> If Abbot’s dedicatory address can be taken at face value, Oglander had ‘a heart replete with every sentiment of humanity, and [his] actions have proclaimed [his] benevolence’.<sup>10</sup>



Portrait of the Revd Dr John Oglander (oil on canvas, 1778) by George Romney  
New College, Oxford, NCI 409

<sup>9</sup> Biographical details from Joseph Foster, *Oxford Men & Their Colleges* (Oxford: James Parker, 1893), p. 203, Thomas Frederick Kirby, *Winchester Scholars: List of the Wardens, Fellows, and Scholars of Saint Mary College of Winchester, near Winchester, commonly called Winchester College* (London: Henry Frowde, 1888), p. 251, and London Church of England Parish Registers, Saint Marylebone: Marylebone Road, Westminster, Marriages and Banns of Marriage, 1775–1777, The London Archives, P89/MRY1/167: <[www.ancestry.co.uk/search/collections/1623/records/4845361](http://www.ancestry.co.uk/search/collections/1623/records/4845361)>, as well as the London Marriage Bonds and Allegations (19 November 1776), The London Archives, MS10091/136: <[www.ancestry.co.uk/search/collections/2056/records/771190](http://www.ancestry.co.uk/search/collections/2056/records/771190)> (Accessed: 12 December 2024).

<sup>10</sup> MS 382, f. 5r.

There is good reason to believe the Revd Dr John Oglander did indeed own this manuscript volume, which has had a fascinating afterlife, and was apparently retained within the warden's wider family after his death. It bears on its inside marble-paper covered front board the armorial bookplate of William Anthony Glynn, i.e. Oglander's great-nephew, pictorially representing the Glynn family's Cornish ancestry.<sup>11</sup> Oglander's elder brother was Sir William Oglander (1733–1806), the fifth baronet of Nunwell, whose daughter, Sukey Margaret Glynn (née Oglander) (1766–1840) married the Revd Anthony William Glynn (1766–1819), a Winchester scholar and New College scholar and fellow (BCL 1793); and this couple's only child was William Anthony Glynn (1807–1866). William was attached at various times to Wadham, Merton, and Magdalen Hall (subsequently Hertford) colleges, receiving his Oxford Doctor of Civil Laws degree in 1851. He and his family lived at Fairy Hill House, Nettlestone, on the Isle of Wight; he was also a justice of the peace for Cornwall.

But the so-named Lunacy Patients Admission Registers, held by The National Archives, suggest his end may have been much worse than his beginning. On 30 October 1863 he was admitted as a private patient to Westbrook House—a lunatic asylum, as it was then called—at 76 High Street, Alton, Hampshire, where two-and-a-half years later, on 28 May 1866, he would eventually die.<sup>12</sup>

No. in order of Admission.	Name.	Private. Paupr.				Date of Admission.	Asylum.	Date of Discharge or Death.	Discharge.	
		M.	F.	M.	F.					
22,777	Glynn Wm Anthony					30 Oct 1863	Westbrook Hs.	28 May 66		
22,793	Griffiths David		1			11 Nov 63	Vernon Hs.	11 Nov 65		
22,854	Gibbons Sarah			1		23 Dec 63	Fisherston	2 Feb 70		
22,857	Gracemark Mary			1		23 Dec 63	—	25 Jan 69		
22,862	Carland John			1		29 Dec 63	—	20 Mar 66	15	
22,866	Gill Caroline F			1		31 Dec 63	Sinubale Hs.	28 Jan 64	15	
						1864				

Record 22,777 detailing William Anthony Glynn's admission to Westbrook House asylum  
Lunacy Patients Admission Registers, Provincial Licensed Houses, The National Archives, MH94/10

What sadly occasioned his mental instability may not be apparent. But some things we can certainly deduce—both from Glynn's own will, and extant letters written that relate to his death. Firstly, he must have had a difficult relationship with the elder of his two surviving sons, (also) William Anthony Glynn (1842–1926); secondly, the younger son, John Henry Oglander Glynn (1847–1924) appears to have profited thereby; and, thirdly, the date of the onset of their father's mental incapacity was, consequently, a contentious matter in relation to the writing of the will. Glynn's will of 24 December 1860 stipulates the division of his estates between his two sons, half of his silver plate to each of them, but one-third in value of his books and only three of his oil paintings to son William, while two-thirds of the plate and the remainder of his oil paintings

<sup>11</sup> See *Armorial Families: A Directory of Gentlemen of Coat-Armour*, ed. Arthur Charles Fox-Davies, 5th ed. (Edinburgh: T. C. & E. C. Jack, 1905), p. 552.

<sup>12</sup> Commissioners in Lunacy 1845–1913, Lunacy Patients Admission Registers, Provincial Licensed Houses (May 1857–December 1879), The National Archives, MH94/10: <[www.ancestry.co.uk/search/collections/9051/records/799837](http://www.ancestry.co.uk/search/collections/9051/records/799837)> (Accessed: 12 December 2024).

(including one of Sergeant Glynn) to go to son John. More pointed and telling is the codicil of just a few days later, 4 January 1861, stipulating that if son William becomes entitled under the will of the 7th baronet, Sir Henry Oglander (1811–1874), or shall in any other way become entitled to the estates of the Oglanders, then he shall lose his share of his father's landed estates, which shall instead go to his brother.<sup>13</sup>

On 29 May 1866, the day after their father dies, son William writes a terse, dispassionate letter to his brother John, three times stressing the need for a quick, discreet funeral, the 'lunacy' of their father no doubt a source of shame to him:

I think the sooner the Funeral takes place the better . . . I shall get it [their father's body] brought to Sea View & buried as quietly as possible: you can do as you like about coming down to it . . . I think the more quietly it is done the better.<sup>14</sup>

Then, on 2 July 1866, executor of the will, the Revd Dr Peter Holmes in Plymouth, writes to John, from which it is clear that William is trying to contest mental incapacity on the part of his father's drawing up the will, unfavourable as that will was to the elder son. Holmes's letter also perhaps indicates that younger brother John is playing his hand with a winning and skilful cordiality:

I lose no time in assuring you of my conviction that your brother has no ground at all for impeaching your good father's state of mind in 1860. I regard the will which he then made (& which seems to suggest this theory of insanity) as full of evidence of your father's coherence of thought and collectedness of mind, the very opposite to the unsoundness talked of. Your brother is naturally disappointed at some of the testamentary provisions, and I sincerely regret that fact; but from my knowledge of the unhappy variance which existed between your brother and his father, previous to the making of the will, I cannot feel any surprise that your father "devised", as he did; and in this will I only find a faithful reflex of your father's mind, ruffled & vexed as I know it to have been by your brother. Now in such a reflex (as I am reminding your brother in a frankly friendly letter) I simply discover an internal evidence of the probability of truth—not an argument of insanity . . . Your Brother knows from me that I must do my duty (whatever be his view) in the offices of Trustee & Executor . . . Your suggestions in proof of you Father's soundness of intellect are very valuable. I am glad to impose on you the pious duty of diligently collecting as many of these proofs and indications as you can from your knowledge & that of neighbours & friends: they may be wanted.<sup>15</sup>

Further extant letters in the Oglander Collection at the Isle of Wight Record Office suggest a strained relationship persisting between the brothers, regarding testamentary and family financial affairs, stemming it would seem from the elder brother's prejudiced view—or prepossession—of their late father's state of mind when he willed his estates and belongings as he did. And yet, the story does not end there.

A year after the death of Lady Louisa Oglander (1821–1894), the widow of Sir William Oglander, 7th baronet of Nunwell, it is the younger not the elder surviving son of William Anthony Glynn who succeeds their cousin the baronet, assuming by royal licence the surname and arms of

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<sup>13</sup> Copy of Will of William Anthony Glynn of Fairy Hill, I.W., Esq., Dr. of Civil Law of Merton College, Oxford, Isle of Wight Record Office, OG/Z/114.

<sup>14</sup> Letter from William Anthony Glynn to his brother John Glynn ([29 May] 1866), Isle of Wight Record Office, OG/CC/525.

<sup>15</sup> Letter from the Revd Dr Peter Holmes, Mannamead, Plymouth, to John Glynn, Fairy Hill, Ryde, I.W. (2 July 1866), Isle of Wight Record Office, OG/CC/527. For access to this and the preceding letter, I am grateful to Lesa Davies, Research Assistant at the Isle of Wight Record Office.

Oglander, in pursuance of their late cousin's will. A break with tradition, and John Henry Oglander, as he then is—also a Cambridge (Trinity Hall), not an Oxford, man—thus inherits Nunwell House, the ancient family seat on the Isle of Wight. And it will be he who will be memorialised in the private Oglander Chapel in the church of St Mary the Virgin, in Brading on the Isle of Wight. His sometime estranged elder brother, William Anthony Glynn, will outlive him by two years.<sup>16</sup>



Oglander family memorial, The Oglander Chapel, St Mary the Virgin Church, Brading, Isle of Wight

Let us now return to our newly acquired MS 382. Can it shed any light on the state of mind of the manuscript volume's onetime owner, William Anthony Glynn, at the time when he drew up his will? Well, possibly it can. One element of the manuscript we have yet to consider is an intriguing range of supplementary materials included with the volume. As well as later pencil and ink notations to the manuscript proper (not in Charles Abbot's hand), there are also a few loose or roughly pasted-in newsprint clippings and, far more substantially, several additional leaves of later white and blue paper (some bound in) with verses and notes written in ink and dating from the 1850s and early 1860s, most likely fully or partly in William Anthony Glynn's own hand. There are Latin memorial verses 'Written by W. A. G. 1852 on Col. H. Oglander late of H. M. 26th Rgr', i.e. on Henry Oglander (1788–1840) of the regiment known as The Cameronians, son of the 5th baronet of Nunwell and an uncle to the writer, whereas other poetry Glynn has written certainly dates from after he drew up his will and codicil. There are sentimental verses ('Filius scripsit—1862') penned on his late mother, 'In memory of Mrs A. Glynn of Fairy Hill eldest daughter of Sir W<sup>m</sup> Oglander 5<sup>th</sup> Baronet, widow of Revd A. W. G.' There is also, in an exceptionally clear and

<sup>16</sup> Biographical details for John Henry Oglander (Glynn) from: *Armorial Families*, p. 1031, *Alumni Cantabrigienses: A Biographical List of All Known Students, Graduates and Holders of Office at the University of Cambridge, from the Earliest Times to 1900*, part 2: volume 3, ed. J. A. Venn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1947), p. 68, and obituary for 'Mr. J. H. Oglander', *The Times* (17 April 1924), 14. There are biographical details of members of the illustrious Oglander family of Nunwell from the earliest times in Cecil Aspinall-Oglander, *Nunwell Symphony* (London: Hogarth Press, 1945).

neat hand that offers no indications of mental perturbation, a panegyric ‘Written on the arrival of the Princess of Wales—in England. March 10. 1863’ (i.e. Princess Alexandra of Denmark, the future Edward VII’s wife), whose date is less than eight months before Glynn was admitted to the Westbrook House lunatic asylum in Alton.<sup>17</sup>

A notion that William Anthony Glynn was of unsound mind when he wrote his will might, I think, be very difficult to justify.

This newly acquired manuscript of college fellow Charles Abbot, then, is an exciting acquisition for us. Not only does MS 382 contain notable unpublished literary material by a famous New College botanist, but the volume, its additions, and provenance also lend fascinating insights into the history of the extended family and descendants of our longest serving warden in the eighteenth century, John Oglander. I hope it will have yet more stories to tell.

Christopher Skelton-Foord  
Librarian  
New College, Oxford

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<sup>17</sup> These three additions appear in MS 382, respectively, after f. 112v, also after f. 112v, and after f. 104v.