

MEREDITH HANMER'S DATE OF BIRTH¹

Some evidence on the early years and education of Meredith Hanmer that seems to have gone hitherto unnoticed suggests that his date of birth ought to be reconsidered.

In the register of Shrewsbury School compiled by the then headmaster Thomas Ashton, Meredith Hanmer figures in fact amongst the students of the second form in 1562, together with his older brother,² thus posing the problem that if the date of his birth as generally accepted is correct – 1543 in the *DNB* as in all references since then – the cleric would have still been in grammar school as a young man of nineteen.

This fact seems both implausible and unlikely, taking into account that early modern pupils were admitted to and completed grammar school considerably earlier,³ and in light of the subsequent intellectual achievements of Hanmer, an Oxford graduate and Doctor of Divinity deemed ‘an exact disputant, a good preacher, Grecian, and excellent for ecclesiastical and civil histories’.⁴

An examination of sources reveals that while the year of Hanmer's death, 1604, is uniformly agreed upon⁵ there are in fact some interesting discrepancies pertaining to the date of his birth.

¹ I am grateful to Ms Sandy Best for her knowledgeable insight and generous help as curator of the local history collection at Oswestry Library, where this research was carried out.

² Edward Calvert, *Shrewsbury School Regestum Scholarium 1562-1635* (Shrewsbury, 1892); George William Fisher, *Annals of Shrewsbury School* (London, 1899).

³ About the age of ten, but equally commonly as early as six or seven. Andrew Hadfield, *Edmund Spenser. A Life* (Oxford, 2012) 28, 54 and reference therein.

⁴ Anthony à Wood, *Athenae Oxonienses* (London, 1691), 747

⁵ *ODNB* and sources therein cited. The earliest reference to it is found in Ware's *De Scriptoribus Hiberniae* (Dublin, 1639), II, 137.

The earliest mention is supplied by Wood who informs us that Hanmer was: ‘suddenly bereft of his life by the plague raging in Dublin, before he attained to the sixtieth year of his age, in sixteen hundred and four’.⁶ Unless he died shortly before he could turn sixty (a few months to a year, perhaps?) I would not expect such a detail to be mentioned, so that the conjectural date of his birth might be placed in 1544 or 1545, but certainly not 1543. The first time 1543 is mentioned, though indirectly, is in the *History of Shoreditch*, where it is stated that Hanmer died of the plague in 1604 aged sixty-one.⁷ The author does not provide reference for this, but since none of the sources otherwise acknowledged includes the same age detail, I am inclined to think of an error or of a misreading of Wood’s mention in *Athenae Oxonienses*, quoted above.⁸

Possible inaccuracies in the conversion from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar at some point in the transmission of dates might also be taken into account. No other source amongst the ones I was able to locate mentions Hanmer’s date of birth, however, and neither are parish registers of help, since the earliest entries in the records where children born in Pentrepant would have been baptised, Selattyn and Oswestry, date only to 1557 and 1558 respectively.⁹

A correction of the date of birth based on Wood’s claim that Hanmer died before his sixtieth year of age might tentatively provide a more plausible scenario. We might assume that 1562

⁶ *Athenae Oxonienses*, 279

⁷ Henry Ellis, *The History and antiquities of the parish of Saint Leonard* (Shoreditch, 1798), 24.

⁸ Another error in a note on the same page attributes to Ware a work titled ‘Descriptio Hiberniae’ when the reference must be to *De Scriptoribus Hiberniae* (see n. 3). The other sources used by Ellis are Thomas Fuller, *The history of the worthies of England* (London, 1662) and Anthony à Wood, *Athenae Oxonienses* (London, 1691) as listed on page 24.

⁹ The first Hanmer of Pentrepant to appear in Selattyn parish registers is a younger brother who probably died as a child: Robert ap Thomas ap Richard alias Hanmer christened May 10th 1558 and buried the following March (*The Register of Selattyn, Shropshire*, 1906, 3, 4).

was Hanmer's last year at Shrewsbury and that he finished grammar school at seventeen or eighteen.¹⁰ The Shrewsbury register was in fact commenced by Thomas Ashton following his appointment as a schoolmaster in 1561, but the school had been running since 1552, and Hanmer and his brother might have well begun to attend before Ashton's arrival.¹¹ This might have been the case also for another pupil, Philip Stringer, Cambridge fellow and author of the accounts of the Queen's visits to Oxford, who figures among the pupils admitted in 1562, and was conjecturally born in 1547.¹²

Nevertheless, fellow pupils in the Shrewsbury 1562 class seem mostly to have been five to ten years younger than the Hammers and Stringer. Amongst the names identified so far there are the MP for Shrewsbury and member of the Council of the marches of Wales Richard Barker, born in 1554 c. and Sir Vincent Corbet, knighted by James I in 1607 also born in 1554; the scholar Andrew Downes, born in 1549 c.;¹³ Walter Leveson, Sheriff of Shropshire and MP for Shropshire and George Mainwaring, also MP for Shropshire, both born in or

¹⁰ This would have been comparatively late, and a more usual age for attending university. See for instance Jean R. Brink, 'Revising Edmund Spenser birth date to 1554' <doi:10.1093/notesj/gjp158> *Notes and Queries* Volume CCLIV Number 4 December 2009, pp. 523-4.

¹¹ The register compiled by headmaster Ashton is a register of 'Admittances and readmittances' begun in December 1562 (Calvert, *Regestum*, preface). I have not been able to ascertain whether it also listed pupils admitted before the beginning of its compilation (Fisher, *Annals*, 4-7).

¹² *A Cambridge Alumni Database* (ACAD), <<http://venn.lib.cam.ac.uk/acad/2016/search-2016.html>>, accessed 14 April 2016.

¹³ Barker, Richard (1554-1636), *History of Parliament Online*, <<http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1558-1603/member/barker-richard-1554-1636>>, accessed 14 April 2016; for Richard Baker see Fisher, *Annals*, 13; for Andrew Downes *A Cambridge Alumni Database*, <<http://venn.lib.cam.ac.uk/acad/2016/search-2016.html>>, accessed 14 April 2016.

before 1551.¹⁴ The future tutor to Robert Devereux, Robert Wright, born in 1549 c. is also listed in the 1562 admittances, as is the future bishop of Leighlin and Dean of St Patrick, Richard Meredith.¹⁵

In sum, the inconsistencies discussed do not fully account for Hanmer's surprisingly late education, but they are indicative of a gap in our knowledge. Perhaps the news that Shrewsbury School was flourishing after the arrival of Thomas Ashton in 1561 (while having previously suffered from a very bad reputation)¹⁶ prompted some parents to have their children attend the school even at a comparatively late age; nonetheless, Meredith Hanmer's birth should probably be revised, and placed in 1544-45 at the earliest.¹⁷

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¹⁴ Leveson, Walter (1551-1602), *History of Parliament Online*,

<<http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1558-1603/member/leveson-walter-1551-1602>>, accessed 14 April 2016.

¹⁵ Paul E. J. Hammer, 'Wright, Sir Robert (c.1549–1608x10)', <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/30053>>, accessed 14 April 2016. Richard Meredith was in class four (Calvert, *Regestum*, 4).

¹⁶ Fisher, *Annals*, 4-7

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