

Canonbury Place & Tower



Background history of Canonbury, its Freemasonic connections and its use by the poet-philosopher-lawyer and Lord Chancellor, Francis Bacon.

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Canonbury and its Historical Associations

Canonbury Place in Islington, London, was once a Tudor mansion set in beautiful gardens and grounds, surrounded by fertile fields and attractive countryside, and situated on the highest part of the hill of Islington outside and overlooking the City of London.¹ Until the 19th century it was noted for the “remarkable goodness of its air” and its fine view of distant London. St. Paul’s Cathedral lies almost exactly two miles due south. The manor used to consist of a triangle of land, totalling approximately 184 acres and bounded by Upper Street, St. Paul’s Road (i.e. Hopping Lane, as it was once called) and Essex Street (i.e. Lower Street). It extended as far as Islington Green, where Upper Street and Essex Road meet.

The Manor of Canonbury is first mentioned in the Domesday Book of 1087, where it is recorded that one Derman, of London, held land here which had formerly been held by Algar, a servant of Edward the Confessor. Later, the manor came into the possession of Geoffrey de Mandeville, Earl of Essex in King Stephen’s reign.

Sir Geoffrey de Mandeville is associated with the Knights Templars, in that when he died his body was first carried by Templars to the Old Temple in Holborn, and then later buried in the New Temple in Fleet Street after the latter had been built and consecrated in 1185. A recumbent statue of this knight lies in the Templar round church (Temple Church), one of a unique set of ten such monuments in the round church.

After de Mandeville’s death, c. 1242, the manor was acquired by the de Bemers family, who owned the nearby estate of Berners-bury (now known as Barnsbury).

Canonbury and Prior Bolton of St Bartholomew’s Priory

Sometime between 1242 and 1253 Ralph de Berners gave the manor to the prior and canons of St. Bartholomew’s Priory in Smithfield,² from whom is derived the name of the manor—‘Canonbury.’

In 1505 William Bolton was elected Prior of St. Bartholomew’s Priory and joint Master of the Hospital. In 1520 he became a member of Gray’s Inn. He was a great architect and builder, and was employed by both Henry VII and his mother, Margaret Beaufort, Countess of Richmond, whose monument in Westminster Abbey he designed. He restored and added to St. Bartholomew’s Priory and built New Hall at Chelmsford in Essex. When Sir Reginald Bray, the designer of Henry VII’s Chapel in Westminster Abbey, died in 1503, Bolton took over as Master of Works and brought the chapel to completion. He “builDED of new”, according to Stow, the manor house at Canonbury (records show that there was a house on this site dating back to before 1306).

Bolton’s new manor house at Canonbury, built for himself, his canons and his successors, was on a grand scale, its two ranges forming two sides (south and east) of a large courtyard.

A detached and separately entranced tower complex (Canonbury Tower) was built at the northern end of the west side of the courtyard. The south range contained the great hall and formed the main part of the house.³ The west side of the courtyard had some ancillary buildings, whilst the north side was kept open.

The garden leading south off the main south range was walled and had octagonal garden houses at its two southernmost corners. It formed a private garden known as 'the Prior's Park'. Another walled garden was laid out to the north of the courtyard, in which was contained the fish-pond, the latter standing immediately north of and adjacent to Canonbury Tower.⁴

Bolton's rebus signature—a bolt piercing a tun—can still be seen on one of the two octagonal garden houses (now incorporated in No.4 Alwyne Villas). Another rebus is to be carved on one of the old monastic doorways in the east wing (now No.6 Canonbury Place) of the manor house. This wing probably consisted of a refectory over which were dormitories or dorters.

Canonbury manor lay in the midst of a large area of valuable agricultural land which provided a supply of dairy produce, fruit and vegetables for the growing City of London. There was a plentiful supply of fresh water from the many springs in the neighbourhood, and the pond shown in several old prints of Canonbury Tower—and used presumably for the canons' Friday fish—gives evidence of a spring very near to this building.



In fact there is a powerful water riser immediately under Canonbury Tower, and the prior and his monks not only tapped into this but also constructed an underground conduit, large enough for a man to walk in for repairs, to pipe water (via lead piping) from the cellar of Canonbury Tower to the Priory and Hospital at Smithfield about two miles to the south. (The conduit or tunnel had various 'pavilions' en route for access and a supply of air. Air raids during World War II revealed some of the conduit as well as destroying parts of it. The conduit has now been filled in or blocked off.)

Canonbury Manor Post-Reformation

Prior Bolton died in 1532 and was succeeded by Prior Fuller, who had been abbot of Waltham Holy Cross, the great Augustinian Abbey in Essex, and was on good terms with Henry VIII. Henry obtained a lease of Canonbury, granting it at first to Sir Richard Rich. In 1539, a few months before the Dissolution of the monasteries, Thomas Cromwell, the chief minister for the Dissolution, purchased Canonbury for the king, who then granted it to Cromwell. In the following year Cromwell was executed and the manor again reverted to the king, who later used the rents from the estate to supplement an annuity for his divorced wife, Anne of Cleves.

In 1547 King Edward VI granted the manor to John Dudley, Earl of Warwick, later Duke of Northumberland. When Northumberland was executed for his aborted attempt to place his daughter-in-law, Lady Jane Grey, on the throne of England, the manor once again reverted

to the Crown. Queen Mary granted the manor in 1556 to David Broke, and in 1557 to Thomas, the second Lord Wentworth.

Sir John Spencer and Canonbury

In the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, Lord Wentworth leased Canonbury to Sir John Spencer, an Alderman of London and a wealthy cloth merchant and member of the Merchant Adventurers.⁵ Spencer eventually bought the manor in 1570 and rented it to William Ricthorne, who died at Canonbury in 1582; and afterwards to Sir Arthur Atye, Public Orator of Oxford University, who married Ricthorne's widow.

Sir John Spencer largely rebuilt and refurbished the early Tudor building, in particular extending the east range, adding gable windows and constructing elaborate moulded plaster ceilings over the long gallery and adjacent rooms.⁶ The outward appearance of Canonbury Place at his death can only be guessed at by prints of over a century later.



CANONBURY HOUSE FROM THE SOUTH, 1753.

The southern (central) range consisted of a high and relatively narrow building, over most of which ran a long pitched roof interrupted on each side by at least seven dormer windows and surmounted by a lanthorn which probably lit the great hall. The Elizabethan addition at the western end had four gables facing south, whilst the western range consisted of ancillary accommodation joined to the otherwise separate Canonbury Tower by an archway. This archway was the main entrance to the courtyard. The eastern range, which was extensively altered by Spencer, had five gables facing east and five facing westwards into the courtyard.⁷ The rebuilding was probably completed by the early 1590's and the embellishments to the rooms by 1600-1601.

The decoration of the interior of Canonbury Place was in the elaborate style in vogue at the end of Elizabeth's reign, which must have well suited the taste of a merchant prince like Spencer. It is in the east wing that three of Spencer's ceilings still exist to reflect some of the glory of his wealth and taste. A Venetian contemporary of Spencer's describes the rooms of the main building as "long porticoes or halls without chambers, with windows on each side looking on gardens and rivers, the ceilings being marvellously wrought in stone with gold and the wainscot of carved wood representing a thousand beautiful figures."

The richness of design on the plaster ceilings was evidently enhanced by colouring and gilding, and their mouldings succeeded in giving the impression of stone. These grand rooms were handsomely wainscoted with oak, in square and lozenge-shaped panels, and each of the main rooms contained a magnificent chimney-piece of elaborately carved oak with oaken figures and other symbolism.⁸

These extremely fine examples of carved oak panelling (wainscoting) and fireplaces, full of Masonic and Rosicrucian symbolism, form a major part of Spencer's very important legacy to posterity. One is dated 1601, but they were probably commissioned when Spencer took up regular occupation of the mansion in 1599, living there until his death in 1610. In particular the symbolism of the panelling and chimney-pieces in the tower rooms, as well as the siting and architecture of Canonbury Tower, is such that it indicates a more esoteric use beyond that of a mere dwelling place.

Particular carvings in Canonbury Tower, together with the winding staircase, arrangement of rooms and seven levels of the tower, suggest that it was used for Freemasonry. Moreover, some chairs originating from Canonbury, made in the late 1590's, suggest the practice not just of the three Craft degrees but also some form of the Royal Arch degree. (That all these degrees existed in Elizabethan times is evidenced by the title page to John Dee's *General and Rare Memorials pertaining to the Perfect Arte of Navigation*, published in 1577.)

In this regard, it is noteworthy that Sir John Spencer was on intimate terms with Francis Bacon, signing himself in a business letter to Francis dated 1593, "Your very loving friend," and also that in 1594 he became Lord Mayor of London and purchased Crosby Place in Great St. Helens in Bishopsgate, where he held his mayoralty.⁹ Built by Sir John Crosby in 1470, Henry VIII's chancellor, Sir Thomas More, had once occupied this house for a few years. Here, at the request of Henry VIII, a college for the "Advancement of Learning and Training of Statesmen" was set up by More and Nicholas Bacon, the principles of which were carried through into Elizabeth I's reign and helped inspire Francis Bacon for his even greater Advancement and Proficiency of Learning project, the Great Instauration.¹⁰ It was in the 1590s that Francis, with his brother Anthony, established their 'Knights of the Helmet', as announced during the 1594 Gray's Inn Christmas Revels, *The Prince of Purpoole and the Honourable Order of the Knights of the Helmet*.

In 1603 Spenser became President of St. Bartholomew's Hospital and was obviously concerned with its water supply. He may well have purchased the underground water conduit from the Rich family after Baron Rich's death in 1567.

In 1599 Sir John Spenser's only daughter and heir, Elizabeth ('Eliza'), eloped from Canonbury with William Lord Compton (who, tradition says, smuggled her away from her father's house in a large flap-topped baker's basket) and married her lover much against her father's will.

This caused great distress, but fortunately father and daughter were reconciled in 1601 at the christening of their first child, through the good offices of Queen Elizabeth. Lord and Lady Compton then came to live at Canonbury and their second child was born there in 1605.

In 1610 Sir John Spencer died and his daughter 'Eliza' and son-in-law William Lord Compton (who was created Earl of Northampton in 1618) inherited Canonbury together with Spencer's considerable wealth. Their family country seat, however, was at Castle Ashby, Northampton, where William continued the rebuilding of the great house that was started in 1574 by his father, Henry Compton, 1st Baron Compton. The Comptons only lived at Canonbury occasionally, and in the intervals the mansion was frequently mortgaged and let.

Sir Francis Bacon's Lease of Canonbury

In 1616 Canonbury Manor was leased by the Comptons to Sir Francis Bacon, who was then Attorney General and a personal friend. He is believed to have lived there for a while, although in 1617, when he was made Lord Keeper of the Great Seal, his official residence in London became York House on the Strand until his impeachment in 1621, when he was forced to give it up. Bacon also had his country house at Gorhambury, near St. Albans, where he enjoyed its lovely gardens and park which he turned into a kind of earthly paradise.¹¹ At Canonbury, within easy reach of London, yet secluded, Bacon was able to carry out his philosophical pursuits and experiments relatively undisturbed.

According to Rix and Rutter's *History of the Royal Society*, the precursor of the Royal Society was an Invisible College founded by Bacon in 1616, the very year in which he first rented Canonbury. The frontispiece to Thomas Sprat's *History of the Royal Society* (1667), declares Bacon to be the Society's "Artium Instaurator," and in the book Dr. Sprat states: "I shall only mention one great man who had the true Imagination of the whole extent of this enterprise as it is now set on foot, and that is the Lord Bacon."

Various Rosicrucian pamphlets of the early 17th century refer to the existence of an "Invisible College", being that of the Fraternity of the Golden and Rosy Cross. Ben Jonson suggests the existence of such a college in his masque, *The Fortunate Isles and Their Union*, related in meaning to Bacon's "Salomon's House" as described in Bacon's *New Atlantis*. Bacon's Knights of the Helmet were also known as the invisibles, as their metaphorical helmets, given to them by Pallas Athena, goddess of wisdom, supposedly rendered them 'invisible'. That is to say, they carried out their work in secret, or anonymously.

This "Invisible College" or "Salomon's House" inspired various followers, such as Samuel Hartlib and Robert Boyle, which led to the founding of the Royal Society in 1660. Boyle refers to "our invisible college" or "our philosophical college" in letters written in 1646 and 1647.

In 1617, the year in which Bacon became the Lord Keeper of the Great Seal and the year after the reputed founding of the 'Invisible College', the poet and historian Edmund Bolton, a barrister of the Inner Temple, friend of Bacon and kinsman of George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham, proposed to King James I a design for a Royal Academy or College of Honour, of letters and science, complete with a Senate of Honour, for the advancement of learning. It was to be "incorporated vnder the tytle of a brotherhood or fraternitie, associated for

matters of Honour and Antiquity,” and consist of three classes of persons called Tutelaires, Auxiliares and Essentials. Its members were to “love, honour and serve each other according to the spirit of St. John”, thus suggesting a Freemasonic design.¹² The headquarters of the College was to be at Windsor. The design was advocated to the Lords in Parliament by Buckingham in 1621 and approved in 1624. The death of James in March 1625, however, meant that this project was shelved, as James’ successor, Charles I, did not share his father’s scholarly interests and considered the plan “too good for the times”. Details of this project, indicating that it emanated from or was inspired by Bacon, can be found in the *Commentaries* or *Transportata* among Bacon’s manuscripts in the British Museum.

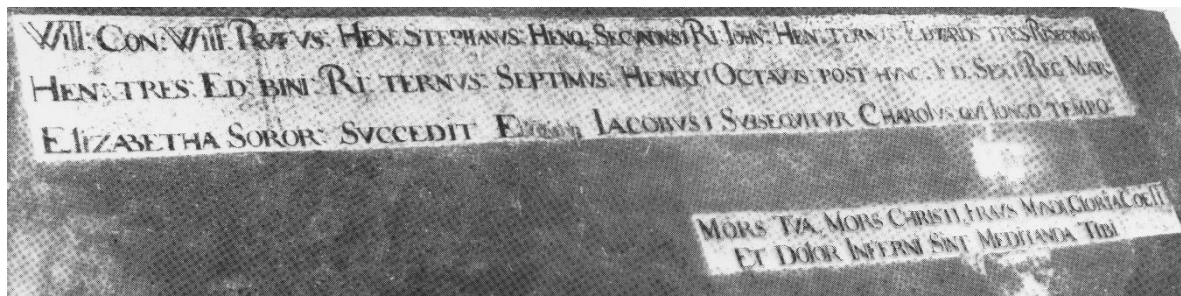
The connection with Freemasonry is important. In September 1721, shortly after the London Grand Lodge had been refounded in 1717 as the Grand Lodge of London and Westminster (later calling itself the Grand Lodge of England), the freemason James Anderson was commissioned by the Grand Lodge to write a history of the Free-Masons, which was published in 1723 as *The Constitutions of the Free-Masons*. Its history states cryptically that English Freemasonry’s founder and First Grand Master was St. Alban, Knight, Steward of the Emperor’s Household and Chief Ruler of the Realm. Significantly, in February 1621, Francis Bacon—who in 1617 was appointed Lord Keeper of the Great Seal and, in 1618, created Baron Verulam of Verulam and Lord High Chancellor to King James, ‘Emperor’ of Great Britain—was created Viscount St. Alban, being named after the saint, not the place (St Albans) as would have been normal practice.¹³ Then soon after, in May 1621, Francis St Alban (as he then signed himself) was ‘martyred’, undergoing impeachment on a trumped up charge of corruption and ordered by the king to plead guilty in order to save Buckingham (and the king) from the fury of Parliament and the people. The 100-year anniversaries are clearly significant and a pointer to the truth.

After Bacon’s impeachment in 1621, John Williams, Bishop of Lincoln, was given the office of Lord Keeper of the Great Seal, followed in 1625 by Sir Thomas Coventry, 1st Baron Coventry. In 1627 Coventry took on the lease of Canonbury, which he held until 1635. By then Lady Northampton (Eliza Spenser) had died (1632) and the property passed into the ownership of her son Spencer Compton, Earl of Northampton.

Whether Bacon continued to hold the lease of Canonbury after his impeachment, we do not know, but as he had originally purchased the lease for 40 years, beginning in 1616, it looks as if he might have still held the lease right up to his death on Easter Day, 9 April 1626, after which Lord Coventry took on the lease (in 1627). Interestingly in this respect, shortly after the death of James I in March 1625, and during the first year of Charles 1’s reign and last year of Francis Bacon’s life, an elaborate inscription containing cipher and a Rosicrucian signature was carefully painted on the wall of the highest room in Canonbury Tower, as a kind of record of its use under the aegis of Lord Bacon and as a message for the future.

Canonbury Tower Inscription

The inscription in the highest room of Canonbury Tower (the sixth level of the staircase tower) comprises a three-line list of the kings and queens of England from William the Conqueror to Charles I, beneath which is a two-line affirmation. This is painted above the door, in contemporary script on white plaster on the internal timber-framed plaster-and-lathe wall dividing the staircase from the room.



The black lettering may have been re-touched and most of a word on the third line is missing, knocked or 'chiselled' out by something hitting it. In Nelson's *History of Islington* (1811), the initial letter of the obliterated word was recorded as an 'F', but it looks more likely to be an 'E'.

The three-line list is roughly divided into hexameter lines by small red vertical marks that divide each line into two parts. The following is a rendition of the inscription, with the second part of each line shown beneath the first part and the damaged letter and obliterated word shown in red:-

WILL: CON: WILL: RUFUS: HEN: STEPHANUS: HENQ: SECUNDUS |
 RI: JOHN: HEN: TERT: ED: TRES: RI: SECUNDUS:
 HEN: TRES: ED: BINI: RI: TERNUS: SEPTIMUS: HENRY |
 OCTAVUS: POS. HUNC. ED. SEXT. REG: MAR:
 ELIZABETHA SOROR: SUCCEDIT E--- JACOBUS |
 SUBSEQUITUR CHAROLUS QUI LONGO TEMPO:

MORS TVA, MORS CHRISTI, FRAVS MUNDI, GLORIA COELI
 ET DOLOR INFERNI SINT MEDITANDA TIBI

G. B. Rosher, in *Baconiana* of April 1903, gives his reasons for believing the missing letters to have been "EAMQ". The "Q" (as in HENQ. SECUNDUS) could be an abbreviation for "que", thus the word would represent the two Latin words "eam que", meaning "a woman who", and referring to Queen Elizabeth who was succeeded by James. The line would therefore have read:-

ELIZABETHA SOROR: SUCCEDIT EAMQ JACOBUS

Translated, the inscription would read something like this:-

William the Conqueror, William Rufus, Henry, Steven, Henry the Second |
 Richard, John, Henry the Third, Edward the Third, Richard the Second,
 three Henrys, two Edwards, Richard the Third, the Seventh Henry |
 the Eighth, after which Edward the Sixth, Queen Mary,
 Elizabeth her sister, a woman who was succeeded by James |
 followed by Charles for a long time.

Your death, the death of Christ, the deceit of the world, the glory of the heavens
 and the pain of the Infernal – these are meditations for you

In the early 1980s, Thomas Bokenham,¹⁴ a Baconian cryptologist, detected a cipher in this inscription that pointed to something being concealed behind the plaster, inside the cavity between the two plaster-and-lathe facings of the wall. When this was investigated, there was evidence that someone had previously opened up the cavity and, if there had been anything in it, removed whatever might have been there. The Tower, in fact, once contained several concealed cupboards, but all were found to be empty, their contents (if any) all removed.

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Endnotes

¹ Islington is derived from Y-Sel-Don, meaning 'Hill of the Sun/Son/Light of God.'

² The founder of St Bartholomew's Priory and Hospital was Rahere, or Rayer, whom Stow called "a pleasant witted gentleman" and who was in attendance at the Court of Henry I. He subsequently became a prebendary of St. Paul's Cathedral. While on a pilgrimage to Rome he contracted malaria and in his convalescence he vowed to make a hospital for the sick. Subsequently, in a vision, St. Bartholomew appeared and desired him to build a church as well. He returned to London as an Augustine monk and was given authority to build at "Smooth-field" by Henry I.

The whole of Smithfield was then an open space, where once had been a Roman cemetery, and the land incorporated what was to become the site of the Charter-house, all of which was included in the grant of 1123. This was before the Carthusians settled here in 1371 and named their monastery after their parent house, Chartreuse. A further charter of privileges, confirming the previous grant, was made in 1133 and witnessed by Henry of Blois, Bishop of Winchester, Stephen, who was not then King, Aubrey de Vere, Geoffrey de Mandeville's brother-in-law who later became the first Earl of Oxford, and others.

³ The south and west ranges (except for Canonbury Tower) of the Tudor mansion no longer exist. The south range was pulled down in 1770 by a Mr. John Dawes, who built the houses which now exist on the site. The west range, consisting of stables and the like, may have been demolished earlier, although there is a record of a long range of tiled buildings with an old oak folding-gate being pulled down in 1840.

⁴ The wall to the north garden ran between the present Grange Road and St Mary's Road to St Paul's Road (Hopping Lane), returning back to Canonbury Tower along the present Canonbury Road and north side of Canonbury Square.

⁵ Sir John Spencer became Master of the Clothworker's Company in 1580, Sheriff of London in 1583, and (as Sir John Spencer, Knight) Lord Mayor of London in 1594. From 1604-10 he was President of St. Bartholomew's Hospital. His main residence and place of business from 1594 until 1599 was Crosbie Hall in Great St Helens, Bishopsgate. It was at Crosbie Hall that Henry VIII's Lord Chancellor, Sir Henry More, together with Sir Nicholas Bacon, had set up (at the request of the King) a College for the "Advancement of Learning and Training of Statesmen."

⁶ Excluding Canonbury Tower, only fragmentary walls of Prior Bolton's buildings can be traced in the present houses. But Canonbury Tower is still largely Bolton's, with its 'square' winding staircase of

short straight flights and quarter space landings, wrapped around a centre of timbering and plaster (containing cupboards) instead of an open stairwell.

⁷ During some restoration in 1926, the old timbers of three of these gables were bared, revealing some wooden mullioned windows with plain mouldings around their frames. The walls between the timbering were found to be nothing more substantial than plaster.

⁸ One chimneypiece together with some panelling was removed to Compton Wynyates c. 1865 and placed in the Drawing-Room. Two other chimney pieces were taken to Castle Ashby c. 1877, where they were erected in King William's Room and the Great Hall.

⁹ Sir John Spencer purchased Crosby Place for £2,650, a great deal of money in those days.

¹⁰ In the reign of Henry VIII, Nicholas Bacon together with Robert Carey and Thomas Denton proposed the creation of a new inn of court or educational college for the "Advancement of Learning and Training of Statesmen", conceived along the lines of a humanist academy and financed with the revenues of former monastic properties, but the king withheld the money and the plan did not take off. However, in Elizabeth I's reign, Sir Nicholas Bacon took the idea further and combined it with legal experience of wardship, and in a paper of 1561 made a recommendation in this respect to the queen. The principles of this education were applied in respect of the education and training of Sir Nicholas Bacon's sons, Anthony and Francis.

¹¹ Gorhambury manor was inherited by Francis Bacon when his brother, Anthony Bacon, died in 1601. Anthony had inherited the property on the death of his father, Sir Nicholas Bacon, in 1579.

¹² To "Love, Honour and Serve" sums up the tenets of the three basic degrees of Craft Freemasonry, leading to the 4th 'Exalted' degree of the Royal Arch, the opening degree of Rosicrucianism. St. John is the patron saint of Freemasons and Rosicrucians alike, the Baptist of the former and the Beloved or Divine of the latter, and the Spirit of St. John being the Holy Spirit.

¹³ The 'Second' Grand Lodge was founded in 1717, exactly 100 years after the more veiled founding of the First Grand Lodge in 1617. But this 'Second' Grand Lodge was only for the Craft Degrees of Freemasonry—the Royal Arch of Rosicrucians having by then withdrawn further behind the veil of secrecy. A substitute Grand Royal Arch was introduced forty-nine years later, in 1766, by the establishing of the Grand and Royal Chapter, from which is developed the present-day Supreme Grand Chapter of Royal Arch Masons of England and its equivalents in Ireland, Scotland and elsewhere. The Grand Chapter of the Royal Arch functions separately from the Craft Grand Lodge, rather than the two being integrated together as one single Grand Lodge.

The 100 year interval is part of Bacon's scheme. Anderson's *Constitutions* of 1723, for instance, were published exactly 100 years after the publication of Bacon's *De Augmentis Scientiarum* and the Shakespeare Folio, which together show, in literary form, the Twin Pillars of Freemasonry (i.e. Philosophy and Art) as well as the genesis, purpose and scope of modern Freemasonry. 100 is the simple cipher count of 'FRANCIS BACON,' as well as having cabalistic significance.

¹⁴ Thomas Bokenham was for many years Chairman and Treasurer of the Francis Bacon Society, and wrote various articles for the Society's magazine, *Baconiana*, plus some short books, including *Bacon, Shakespeare and the Rosicrucians* and *A Brief History of the Bacon-Shakespeare Controversy*. In November 1994 he appeared in a BBC TV documentary entitled "The Battle of Wills", in which he presented his evidence of a cipher in the inscription on the Westminster Abbey Shakespeare Memorial in Poets Corner.