



WILLIAM PETYT

BORN C.1641
DIED 3.10.1707

ADM IT 1664; CALL 1671;
BENCHER 1687;
TREASURER 1701

LEFT HIS LIBRARY AND
MANUSCRIPTS TO THE INNER
TEMPLE LIBRARY 1707



INNER TEMPLE LIBRARY
MEMBERS PROFILES

PROFILE

William Petyt, the barrister, writer and political propagandist, was the donor of the manuscripts which now form the bulk of the Library's Petyt Collection, the largest of the five collections of manuscripts held by the Library. It includes the Library's oldest manuscript (Macrobius's commentary on Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis*, from the mid-twelfth century) and items written by Elizabeth I, Edward VI and Lady Jane Grey. Petyt's bequest was arguably the single most important development in the Library's history.

Petyt was born in around 1640 in the village of Storiths, near Bolton Abbey in Yorkshire. His father, also called William Petyt, was a lawyer and landowner. Petyt was educated at the Free Grammar School in nearby Skipton and at Christ's College, Cambridge. On 8 June 1660, shortly after matriculating at Cambridge, he was admitted to the Middle Temple, but was specially admitted to the Inner Temple on 25 November 1664. He obtained a post as Exigenter of the Common Pleas, a clerk responsible for making out writs of exigent (issued in the course of proceedings in outlawry). While working in this position he was entrusted with preparing the Inner Temple's case in a dispute between the Inn and the City of London: a riot had broken out after the Lord Mayor attempted to have his sword borne before him within the Inn's precincts. When he was called to the Bar by the Inner Temple in February 1671, reference was made to his "services done in asserting and defending the rights and privileges of the Temple". In 1689 he became a Bencher, and he was the Inn's Treasurer for the year 1701/02.

Although a successful practising barrister, Petyt also devoted much of his attention to historical research, his chief interests being Parliamentary history and constitutional law. He was a proponent of Whig views, and friends with many of the most radical Whigs of the period. A devoted Parliamentarian and strongly in favour of excluding James, Duke of York (later James II), from the throne, he wrote briefs upholding the radical ancient constitutionalist cause, becoming a highly-valued Whig polemicist. Petyt's works upheld a Whiggish

view of the past, based upon the assumption that governmental arrangements in England had changed little since the pre-Norman period. This view, which supported the idea of a legally sovereign Parliament with a right to alter the succession, was under attack by Tory writers in the 1670s and 1680s. Petyt's first book, *The Antient Right of the Commons of England Asserted* (1680), strongly defended the Whig view and was hugely influential. After his side's victory in the revolution of 1689, he was appointed Keeper of the Records in the Tower of London by William III, a position which he held from July 1689 until his death.

Petyt continued to write on the subject of Parliamentary history; his major works include *Miscellanea Parliamentaria* (1680), *The Pillars of Parliament* (1681) and *Jus Parliamentarium* (1739, published posthumously). The Library holds Petyt's own copies of *The Antient Right of the Commons of England Asserted* and *Miscellanea Parliamentaria*, both bearing his signature on the flyleaf. He never married, and had no children; he died at his home in Chelsea on 3 October 1707, and was buried in the Temple Church. In his will he left his collection of manuscripts to the Inner Temple, naming six trustees who were to "use their utmost endeavours for preserving and keeping them safe and entire". To this end he left £150 to the Inner Temple "to buy or build a place ... for preserving and keeping them", which was spent on extending the Library. In addition, he left a further £50 to the Inn to purchase books for the Library. The Inn's first Librarian, Samuel Carter, was appointed in 1708, and that year the trustees directed that Petyt's collection "shall forever hereafter be deposited and kept in the late erected Library of the Inner Temple".

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Calendar of the Inner Temple Records

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