

THE MATHEMATICAL GAZETTE

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OUGHTRED'S "CLAVIS"

OUR Association has numbered among its members several authors whose textbooks have won world-wide repute. To include in our series of plates some references to earlier influential textbooks is therefore not inappropriate.

William Oughtred (1574–1660) is best known for his *Clavis Mathematicae* (1631; second edition, 1648; third edition, much enlarged, 1652). Soon after publication it had been recognised as a standard work on arithmetic and algebra, containing practically all that was then known on these subjects; it was used at Oxford and at Cambridge as a text on which lectures were given. Newton records that he read "clean over Oughtred's *Clavis*" somewhere about 1663, and Robert Boyle speaks highly of it. Its influence lasted through the century, and has been felt much further, for it can be regarded as setting a standard of exposition which entitles it to be reckoned the first modern textbook in this country.

Oughtred paid particular attention to the use of symbols, and was the first to employ the St. Andrew's cross as a sign for multiplication. He also was a pioneer in the use of abbreviations for the sine, tangent, cosine and cotangent, probably the inventor of the radix method of calculating logarithms, and, according to Cajori, the inventor of the slide rule.

Oughtred was born at Eton, and educated at Eton and King's College, Cambridge; he took orders in 1603 and spent the rest of his life in country livings. Several anecdotes of him survive. His wife was, we are told, a penurious shrew, who would often deprive him of his after-supper candle, "whereby many a good notion was lost and many a problem unsolved". Oughtred died a few weeks after the restoration of Charles II, and his death is said to have been caused by his immoderate joy at this event; but the weight of his eighty-six years may have been as much the cause as his exuberant Royalism.

For the plate, we are indebted to the Photographic Department of the British Museum.