

The discovery of the correct birth date for selenographer Thomas Gwyn Empy Elger

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Since his death on 1897 January 9, biographies and obituaries of the selenographer and founding member of the British Astronomical Association, Thomas Gwyn Empy Elger (TGEE), have given the year of his birth as 1837 or 1838.¹ With the help of my friend Anthony Brunning, Provincial Bursar of a religious order, the De La Salle Brothers, of Clayton Court, near Liss in Hampshire, we have ascertained that the correct birth date for Thomas Gwyn Empy Elger is 1836 October 27. This is the date recorded in a schedule of graves in Bedford Cemetery prepared for the North Bedford Borough Council. The baptismal register of St Mary's, Bedford records his baptism on 1836 November 27, as shown in Figure 1. Elger was the first Director of the BAA Lunar Section, the author of the book *The Moon* (1895) and numerous lunar articles.

While researching the history of Clayton Court, Anthony discovered that a previous owner of the property was John Elger (1858–1925) who was a first cousin, once removed, of Thomas Gwyn Empy Elger and who served as the executor of TGEE's will. In reading about TGEE, Anthony found out that he was interested in astronomy. Anthony did a search on the Internet to locate more information on TGEE and found my article about a 216mm (8½-inch), 1875, With–Browning reflecting telescope that I own. The article was in the newsletter of my astronomy club, the San Jose Astronomical Association.² In the article, I mention that the telescope had belonged to TGEE. (Further research has in fact shown that the

seller of the instrument misled me about the telescope's provenance and that Elger did not own my instrument.) Looking for more information on TGEE, Anthony contacted me.

Anthony sent me some information about the Elgers and my interest was heightened, because his material showed TGEE's date of birth to be 1836 October 27 and not 1838. Anthony was relying on an old Elger family tree, which gave no sources and which he had not yet been able to verify. I am in the process of writing a major lunar observers' handbook and am very familiar with TGEE. I immediately noticed the discrepancy in birth years, so at first I thought there was a typo of a 6 for an 8 in the last digit for the year. I asked Anthony if he could visit Bedford and check their archives and in particular look at the baptismal records for that time at St Mary's Church, and take a look at the headstones in the Bedford cemetery. The online genealogical records were inconclusive on Elger's birth year and his age in the 1851 and 1881 UK censuses also gave conflicting information regarding his age at the time of the census.

I also wondered if there might be two individuals named Thomas Gwyn Elger with one baby named Thomas Elger born in 1836 in Bedford, but who died before Thomas Gwyn Empy Elger's birth in 1838. Their parents, Thomas Gwyn Elger and Emily Inskip, might have named a second son the same as the deceased child, but added the name Empy to the boy's name for the 1838 baby. Anthony could not find any burial or death records for a Thomas Gwyn Elger between the years 1836 and 1839, nor the birth of a child by that name from 1837 July to 1839 March in the civil registration birth indexes, so my theory of two Elger sons born in the target years is not supported.

In 2004 February, Anthony had an engagement in London. He allowed time to visit the Library of the Society of Genealogists and the Family Records Centre beforehand. In the former he located a microfiche copy of the 'Parish Registers for St Mary's Bedford.' Anthony reviewed the baptismal records for the years 1836–1837 and found an entry for Thomas Gwyn Empy Elger (no. 450, page 57) with his baptism dated 1836 November 27. The record names his parents as Thomas Gwyn and Emily Elger and lists the father's occupation as 'builder.' This information has been confirmed from other sources as being correct, in particular real estate and mortgage records for Bedford. At the Family Records Centre, Anthony consulted the microfilm of the 1851 Census for Bedford. This census

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BAPTISMS solemnized in the Parish of *St Mary's Bedford* in the County of *Bedford* in the Year 1836.

When Baptized.	Child's Name.	Parents Name.		Abode.	Quality, Trade, or Profession.	By whom the Ceremony was performed.
		Christian.	Surname.			
1836. Novbr 27. No. 449.	<i>Thomas Gwyn Empy</i>	<i>Thomas Gwyn</i>	<i>Elger</i>	<i>St Mary's</i>	<i>Builder</i>	<i>Edw. J. Hartman</i>
1836. Novbr 27. No. 450.	<i>Thomas Gwyn Empy</i>	<i>Thomas Gwyn</i>	<i>Elger</i>	<i>St Mary's</i>	<i>Builder</i>	<i>Edw. J. Hartman</i>
1836. Novbr 27. No. 451.	<i>Thomas Gwyn Empy</i>	<i>Thomas Gwyn</i>	<i>Elger</i>	<i>St Mary's</i>	<i>Builder</i>	<i>Edw. J. Hartman</i>

Figure 1. Baptismal record for TGEE from the parish records of St Marys, Bedford. Bedfordshire & Luton Archives and Records Service.



Figure 2. A section of the lunar map by Elger showing the then unnamed crater (double circle to the right of the crater Capuanus) that is now named for Elger. This map first appeared in Elger's book, *The Moon*. (South up.)

enumerated persons resident at an address on the night of 1851 March 30. In the entry for 46 Cauldwell Street, TGEE is recorded as living with his widowed mother and his brother William Henry Elger. TGEE's age is given as 14 years, which is consistent with his being born in late 1836.³ This census also lists his uncle and aunt, Isaac and Eleanor Elger, residing at 49 St John Street, Bedford. In the 1881 census, taken on 3 April, TGEE's age is listed as being 43 years, which would mean that he was born between 1837/April and 1838 April.

The records for the Bedford cemetery established Thomas Gwyn Empy Elger's birth date. In a 'Schedule of all memorials where work is proposed, including full inscriptions on each memorial' produced for the North Bedford Borough Council,⁴ the memorial of TGEE is described as 'Body stone only'. The work proposed is to 'Remove B/S and provide inscription in Memorial Books'. The inscription as recorded in the Schedule reads: 'To the beloved memory of Thomas Gwyn Empy Elger born Oct 27 1836–Died Jan 9 1897 and of Fanny Edith Elger his wife Born May 13 1851–Died Oct 22 1928.' and provides the evidence that Thomas Gwyn Empy Elger was born on 1836 October 27.

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Conclusion

Over the years, numerous authors have relied on and republished what we now know was incorrect information concerning the birth date for Thomas Gwyn Empy Elger. By consulting corroborating primary source materials, Anthony and I have set the record straight.

Acknowledgments

I want to thank Anthony Brunning for his research in the UK and Zena Grant Collier, Records Officer at the Bedfordshire and Luton Archives and Records Service, Bedford, for supplying a copy of the St Mary Baptismal record of Thomas Gwyn Empy Elger.

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- 1 Obituaries consulted: 'Notes. Thomas Gwyn Empy Elger', *J. Brit. Astron. Assoc.*, 7(4), 207, 208 (1897); *MNRAS*, 57(4), 210, 211 (1897); *The Observatory*, 20, (No. 250), 96–98 (1897), and *The Bedford Times and Independent*, 16 January 1897.
- 2 Robert A. Garfinkle, 'Historic With–Browning telescope with unique provenance', *SJAA Ephemeris* (May 2001), 1. (Also available on the Internet at: <http://ephemeris.sjaa.net/0105/b.html>).
- 3 The National Archives, HO107/1752/36/16.
- 4 Bedfordshire and Luton Archives and Records Service, ABV 51/3.

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