

AN INTERDICT ON DOVER, 1298—1299.

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On 1st March, 1298, Robert Winchelsey, archbishop of Canterbury, put the mayor, community and town of Dover under an interdict, which was not removed until 6th October, 1299. This interdict has not been recorded in any history of Dover, and it is probable that the only documents relating to it are in the archbishop's register, now in the library at Lambeth Palace.

Robert Winchelsey was consecrated archbishop of Canterbury in 1294. In the early years of his primacy he was involved in the constitutional struggle with Edward I about the taxation of the clergy and the famous bull of Pope Boniface VIII, *Clericis Laicos*. He was reconciled to the king in July 1297, and at the beginning of 1298 he proposed to make a visitation of his diocese. In January he sent master William Archer, rector of Saltwood, and Robert de Glaston, rector of Cheriton, to Dover, with a commission to cite certain representative citizens of the town to appear before the archbishop on a certain date, at a suitable place within the rural deanery of Dover, and to give evidence about any matters requiring correction and reform.¹

The citation to send representative citizens to a visitation outside the town was resented, and the arrival of the two rectors in Dover provoked an extraordinary disturbance. They were surrounded at once by 'a crowd of sons of Belial,' who abused them and showered blows on them, and showed special hostility to the rector of Cheriton. They hustled him away from his companion, dragged him down to the sea and snatched away the archbishop's letter, which he carried inside his gloves, and struck him repeatedly with open hands and clenched fists. The mayor stood on the seashore looking on, and reproached and mocked him in the presence of all the people; at last he fled from his persecutors in terror that worse things would happen to

¹ Archiepiscopal Registers of Canterbury, Winchelsey, ff. 234^d, 235.

him. On 24th January the archbishop was at Dover, and the next day he issued a mandate to the rural dean of Dover to publish forthwith in all the churches of the deanery, at mass on Sundays and festivals, the excommunication of all persons who had taken part in the assault on the rectors of Saltwood and Cheriton. He was instructed to inquire their names, and to excommunicate by name John at Sea, the mayor, John at Hall the elder, Thomas Dyer, Nicholas Archer, and John of Sturmonth, who were guilty of contumacy, because they had not appeared at the visitation, and to report to the archbishop before 10th February. The men mentioned by name were the leading citizens of the town, whose names appear together as witnesses in documents among the records of Dover.¹

It is clear that the rural dean of Dover informed the archbishop that the mayor and commonalty were directly responsible for the assault, as the common horn had been blown to assemble all the citizens, and also that the offenders were aware of the excommunication, but treated it with contempt. It was not possible to deliver a citation to the mayor and community in Dover, without risk of bodily injury, so on 14th February the archbishop sent a mandate to the vicar of St. Margaret at Cliffe, about three miles from the town, instructing him to read in his church on the next Sunday at mass a public citation to the mayor and community of Dover to appear before the archbishop, the mayor in person or by proxy, with a representative of the community, on the next law day after the feast of St. Matthias, 24th February, to show cause why the archbishop should not lay an interdict on them and their town.² In the formal citation to the mayor and community, the archbishop notified them that he should proceed against them without delay, whether their proctors were present or absent. The mayor and community of Dover ignored the citation, and after taking the advice of counsel, the archbishop put the mayor, community and town of Dover under an interdict, with the notable exception of Dover Castle, which might have involved him in a conflict with the Crown.³ The churches were to be closed, no sacraments were permitted, except the baptism of infants and

¹ *Dover Charters and Other Records*, ed. S. P. H. Statham, pp. 30-39.

² Reg. Winchelsey, ff. 235^d, 236, 236^d.

³ *Ibid.* f. 239.

penance of the dying, and no bodies might be buried in consecrated ground.

A second exception was the Benedictine priory of St. Martin at Dover, for, in accordance with the bull granted by Pope Lucius III in 1182 and confirmed by Pope Celestine III in 1197, the priory church was exempt from a general interdict.¹ Writing from Eastry on 1st March, the archbishop notified the prior and convent of St. Martin that he had put the mayor, community and town of Dover under an interdict from which he excepted them, their monastery and household, on condition that they excluded persons under sentence of excommunication or interdict, that no bells were rung, the doors of the church were kept closed, and that they said the services in a low voice so that no sound was heard outside the building. He reminded the prior and convent that they were forbidden to administer any sacrament to other persons, except baptism of infants and penance of the dying, or to accept bodies for burial. He commanded them to notify him within sixteen days that they were observing these instructions on every point.

On 12th March, the archbishop sent a mandate to the official of the archdeacon of Canterbury to publish the interdict on Sundays and festivals at mass in every church of the diocese and to prohibit all rectors, vicars and parish priests from ringing the bells or celebrating mass in the presence of any inhabitant of Dover.² The official was also instructed to notify every religious community in the diocese of this prohibition, to inquire about any violation of the interdict, and report it to the archbishop.

In accordance with the interdict, the mayor and inhabitants of Dover were excluded from the church of St. Mary in the Castle, the priory church of St. Martin, and every parish church and monastery in the diocese outside Dover. In the town there were the parish churches of St. Peter, St. James, St. Mary, and St. Martin-le-Grand, which combined under one roof the churches of three distinct parishes and was served by an archpriest and two rectors at the altars of St. Nicholas and St. John the

¹ *Cartulary of Dover Priory*, f. 4^d (Lambeth Palace Library).

² Reg. Winchelsey, f. 239^d.

Baptist.¹ St. Peter's may be called the corporation church in the middle ages. When the mayor was elected on the feast of the Nativity of our Lady, 8th September, the common horn was sounded in fourteen places in the town for the common assembly in the church of St. Peter, and the box containing the records and seal was brought from the church of St. Martin-le-Grand.² The archpriest and the five rectors observed the interdict, but in spite of them services were held in St. Peter's, and, perhaps, in other churches. Four chaplains, Richard Domine, William Gogel, William le Graunt and John Michel, Robert, clerk of St. Peter's, and three other clerks, John Baker, Henry Penyfader and Walter Plot knowingly and wilfully violated the interdict by saying the services in a loud voice, ringing the bells and burying the dead in some of the churchyards.³

There is no reference to the interdict in any public record. On 20th May, 1299, Edward I appointed a firm of merchants of Lucca to keep a table at Dover for changing the money of persons coming into the realm or going out.⁴ He was at Dover Castle from 4th June to 11th June⁵; and on 20th July he appointed Robert de Burghersh to the custody of Dover and the Cinque Ports, with £300 a year for the maintenance of himself, a chaplain, servants, watchman and one carpenter dwelling within the castle, and their robes.⁶

The mayor and community ignored the interdict for a year and a half. John at Sea was re-elected mayor on 8th September, 1299, and soon afterwards it was decided to approach the archbishop. In a document dated 30th September, and sealed with the seal of the town, the mayor and community appointed John at Hall the elder and Nicholas Archer as proctors to ask for release from the sentence of excommunication and from the interdict on the town and its inhabitants, and to receive the penance inflicted by the archbishop.⁷ They appeared before him on 1st October and made a solemn promise to submit to discipline. He absolved John at Hall, Thomas Dyer, Nicholas Archer and John of Sturmonth from the sentence

¹ S. P. H. Statham, *History of the Castle, Town and Port of Dover*, pp. 176-9, 197-9, 203-206.

² J. A. Barrington Jones, *Annals of Dover*, pp. 6, 97: cf. Statham, *op. cit.* p. 206.

³ Reg. Winchelsey, f. 89.

⁴ *Cal. Pat. Rolls*, 1292-1301, p. 417.

⁵ *Cal. Close Rolls*, 1296-1302, pp. 252, 253.

⁶ *Cal. Pat. Rolls*, 1292-1301, p. 427.

⁷ Reg. Winchelsey, f. 88.

of excommunication, but before raising the interdict he required time for deliberation, and told the proctors to return on 5th October, when he again put them off until the next day.¹ On 6th October, in the parish church of Chartham, three miles south-west of Canterbury, the archbishop relaxed the interdict on certain conditions.² The mayor and community were commanded to send four or five trustworthy persons to the archbishop's visitation on 3rd November at Newington, three miles west of Folkestone, and therefore to obey a mandate of the same nature as the one which provoked the disturbance in January 1298. They were bound to pay compensation to Robert de Glaston, rector of Cheriton, for injuries done to him, £13 13s. 4d.; to the archpriest of St. Martin-le-Grand, £1 13s. 4d.; to the other two rectors in the same church, £10, to be divided equally; to the rector of St. Peter's, £2 13s. 4d.; to the rector of St. James's, £2; to the rector of St. Mary's, £2 13s. 4d. These payments were to be made to the rectors in the cathedral church of Canterbury on the next feast of the Purification, February 1300. On Michaelmas day, 1300, and again in 1301, the mayor and community were to make two payments of £66 13s. 4d. in the archbishop's palace at Canterbury, and the money was to be set aside for pious uses of a permanent character for a perpetual remembrance.

The archbishop had a right to insist that all bodies buried in consecrated ground during the interdict should be exhumed. He announced his intention of acting with kindness and consideration; the bodies of innocent persons, who had taken no part in the assault on the rectors of Saltwood and Cheriton, were to be left undisturbed, but sculptured stones and other memorials set over them were to be removed immediately and kept apart for ever; mounds over graves were to be levelled by the nearest relations of the dead, and the earth for a foot in depth below the surface was to be dug out and left piled immediately round the graves, until the archbishop ordered otherwise in consideration of the devotion of the survivors. He reserved the question of the exhumation of the bodies of those persons who were directly responsible for the inter-

¹ *Ibid.* f. 88.² *Ibid.* ff. 88-89^d.

dict. He excommunicated the four chaplains and four clerks who had knowingly and maliciously violated the interdict, and forbade the mayor and community to assist, protect, or defend them in any way. The mayor and community were bound to accept the whole of the archbishop's judgment on pain of a renewal of the interdict, and he reserved the right to interpret any clause of it and to increase or diminish the penalties.

The archbishop had gained the victory. The mayor and inhabitants of Dover had created a notable scandal, to no purpose, for they were obliged to send representatives outside the town to the visitation, and to pay in compensation and fines £174 6s. 8d., a sum amounting to about £3,500 at the value of money before the war of 1914-1918.

There is no further reference in the archbishop's register to the interdict or to his relations with the mayor and citizens of Dover. He was at Dover a few weeks later, when he made a visitation of St. Martin's priory, and dated his injunctions to the monks in their chapter-house on 24th November.¹

¹ Ibid. f.