

'CHOPCHURCHES' IN SUSSEX

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A feature of ecclesiastical history in the Middle Ages which is often overlooked is the remarkable fluidity of the beneficed clergy. This phenomenon is particularly obvious in the period for 25 years on either side of 1400 and can be studied in relation to Sussex more easily than for most counties. One reason is the coincidence of the county with the diocese of Chichester; another is that this is one of the few dioceses for which lists of the parochial clergy have been published. In 1900 the Rev. George Hennessy published *Chichester Diocese Clergy Lists*, with a *Supplement* issued the following year.¹ Although this work was far from reliable (e.g. it includes under Old Shoreham a block of five rectors who belonged to Shoreham in Kent) it is a useful basis for the study of the subject. Finally, there is the great card index of Sussex clergy, arranged under parishes and under personal names, in the Society's Library at Barbican House.² This, which owes its existence to the devoted labours of the late Mr. H. G. Glover and subsequently of Mr. J. E. Wadey, gives the sources from which each entry is derived; moreover it is gradually incorporating, largely through the industry of Mr. H. Burgess, the notes on parochial clergy compiled by the indefatigable Mr. E. H. W. Dunkin and now in the British Museum. Furthermore the earliest episcopal register of Chichester, that of Bishop Robert Rede (1397-1415), was edited for the Sussex Record Society (vols. VIII and XI) by Canon Cecil Deedes, who had previously published extracts from the register of Bishop Richard Praty (1438-1445) in vol. IV of the same Society's works.

From these sources it is clear that in the 14th and 15th centuries it was almost normal for a benefice to have seven incumbents in twenty years, while it was equally normal for there to be only four incumbents in fifty years in the 18th and 19th centuries—the record being probably held by Broadwater, where a rector appointed in 1797 was succeeded by one who died in 1906. This difference is partly explained by the shorter expectation of life in the Middle Ages and partly by the fact that a celibate priest with a handful of belongings could change his residence more easily than a married man with a family and a cartload of furniture. But the rapidity with which priests resigned or exchanged their livings remains puzzling.

¹ Hennessy had already published similar clergy lists for London diocese in a revised edition of Newcourt's *Novum Repertorium*.

² Where other references are not given in this article the information is taken from this card index.

As in so many branches of medieval life, things are not always what they seem. The exchange of wealthy preferments often meant not a change of address but merely a change of investment. Very few holders of well endowed rectories ever set foot in their parishes, which were served by vicars, and the papal nominee who in 1281 had held the rectory of West Tarring for seven years without discovering in what diocese it lay¹ was probably not unique. Many of these rectors were in fact officials or lawyers. Take the case of Robert Blundell,² illegitimate son of the Robert Blundell who was M.P. for Chichester in 1366 and 1373. He appears, as 'chaplain,' in 1394 conveying the 'Gildenhalle' in Chichester to the King for transference to the Vicars Choral of the Cathedral as their residence. In October 1397 he was described as notary public and was acting as secretary to the Bishop of Durham; which may account for his shortly afterwards exchanging his rectory of Farnborough (Hants.) for that of Wearmouth (Durham), which he exchanged in 1400 for Bishopsbourne (Kent), which he retained until 1408 when he exchanged it for Monks' Risborough (Bucks.). That he ever set foot in any of these parishes is open to doubt.

Turning to the less well endowed benefices, where the nominal incumbent presumably officiated in person, we may take a few examples of mutability. At Wartling [£6.13.4]³ John Baker in July 1404 exchanged with John Burton, rector of Telscombe [£13.6.8]. Burton had only obtained Telscombe in February of that year in exchange for Ripe [£8], and his tenure of Wartling must have been brief, as Thomas Bytering was admitted as vicar there in March 1407 and exchanged to Etchingam [£8] in May 1408. To the living of Brede [£8] William de Bolton was presented in July 1375; in February 1377 he exchanged with Lambert Trickenham of Ribchester [Lancs.: £22], who in 1378 exchanged with Edward de Byngham of Plumtree [Notts.: £20]. Byngham in July 1379 exchanged with Paul Dunton, rector of Crondale [Kent] who in 1381 exchanged with Robert Smyth, rector of All Saints, Great Massingham [Norf.]. This is an interesting illustration of the widespread system of interchange, involving five dioceses. The same factor appears in the case of the vicarage of Kirdford, where Richard Tansore, presented in October 1374, exchanged in November 1376 with William Power, vicar of West Henreth [Sarum dioc.], who in June 1378 exchanged with Robert Busshe, rector of Swyncombe [Linc. dioc.], who in the following month exchanged with John Knyght of Larkstoke [Winton dioc.].

In April 1401 Hugh Cobbe exchanged his vicarage of Cowfold [£10.6.8] with William Neuton, rector of Snoreham [Essex], who in

¹ *V.C.H. Sussex*, ii, 12.

² *Cal. Papal Letters*, v, 67, 383; *Cal. Close R.*, 1392-6, p. 357; *Cal. Patent R.*, 1399-1401, p. 362; *ibid* 1408-13, p. 1.

³ Figures in square brackets are the values of the benefices as given in the *Taxatio Ecclesiastica* of 1291.

January 1404 exchanged with Simon Ingolf, rector of Hangleton [£11.14.2], who in 1405 exchanged with William Gamen of West Blatchington [£13.6.8]. On the resignation of Gamen in November 1412 John Cranborne was instituted, but in the following September he exchanged with John Alyngton, rector of Worth [£13.3.0], who in the following year exchanged with John Ledes of Woodmansterne [Hants.: £11.7.6]. As a final example we may take the poor rectory of Twineham [£4.6.8]. Here Thomas Newman resigned in October 1399, as did his successor Walter Wylmot in November 1400 and his successor Richard Clerk early in 1401. His successor William Hokkeley a year later exchanged with John Smyth of Clareburgh, vicar of Hooe [£4.13.4], which living Hokkeley exchanged three months later for the vicarage of Rottingdean [£5.13.6]. Smyth's tenure must have been short, as by November 1404 John Godyng was rector and was exchanging with Robert Laste of Great Kimball [Bucks.: £12]. Godyng had already exchanged Bishop's Waltham [Hants.] for Storrington vicarage in 1397 and had moved to Shalden [Winton dioc.] before August 1402 when he exchanged that benefice for the vicarage of Balcombe [£8], and if he is the John Goodyng to whom we shall be referring later he evidently continued his restless flitting.

The essence of an exchange would seem to be that it should be fair to both parties. A rough financial basis is afforded by the official valuation of the livings involved. But this was derived from the 'Taxation of Pope Nicholas' drawn up in 1291, which remained the accepted standard until replaced by the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* of 1535. In the century after 1291 many of the alleged values, based largely on tithes and other agricultural sources, must have been completely altered by the effects of the Black Death and the change from agriculture to sheep farming and other causes. There were also other reasons than financial for a priest to wish to change his benefice. These are not often stated, but we find several instances in the episcopal registers of Salisbury diocese. Thus in 1321 a prebendary of Salisbury wishing to gain experience of parochial work exchanged with the rector of Buckland who wanted to give up such work and serve the cathedral.¹ In 1318 William de Bradewell, rector of Sulhampstead Abbots, desired to exchange with Master Ralph de Querendon, rector of Wytham, on the grounds that Ralph was more learned and better qualified for an important cure like Sulhampstead, whereas Wytham would suit William because it was handy for Oxford, where he hoped to study. He added that the patrons of Sulhampstead (the Abbey of Reading) so persecuted him that he could not carry on, whereas Ralph was on good terms with them.² This last point occurs also in the petition of Stephen Prower in 1325.³ He held one of the four prebends in Shaftesbury

¹ *Reg. Roger Martival* (Cant. and York Soc.), 169.

² *Ibid.* 111.

³ *Ibid.* 319.

Abbey with the cure of Fontmell, to which he had appointed a vicar, as he had also done to his prebend. He alleges that he and his servants were continually persecuted—probably the nuns tried to make him do a bit of work himself. He therefore wished to move to West Monkton [Somerset], where he had kinsmen who would assist him, whereas the present rector of West Monkton was a canon of Salisbury, born in that diocese, with powerful friends and better able to resist persecution and protect the rights of the prebend. Particularly interesting is the petition for exchange between William de Andever, rector of Haversham [Bucks.] and William de Osegodby, rector of Farnborough [Berks.] in 1311. Osegodby protested that he could not carry out his parochial duties as he ought 'on account of the dialect (*diversitatem lingue*) in those parts.' Andever on the other hand wished to move 'because owing to the malice of his parishioners he could not remain there without danger to his life.' The bishop agreed to the exchange on the ground that Andever, having been born in the district, had a better grip of the dialect. One wonders how some of our importees got on with the Sussex dialect.

Theoretically every exchange had to be approved by the bishop of the diocese concerned; but in practice he usually contented himself with a vague statement that the reasons seemed to be good. Occasionally he did put his foot down, as for instance in 1484 when Richard Bampton wished to exchange his vicarage of West Hoathly, which he had held only a few months, with John Nutkyn's vicarage of Reculver. Bishop Story wrote to the Archbishop of Canterbury to say that the exchange was inexpedient; unfortunately the grounds of his decision are not stated. In an interesting case in 1414 Henry Chichele as Archbishop-elect of Canterbury wrote, apparently at the instance of the Bishop of Norwich, to Robert Rede, Bishop of Chichester, asking him to approve an exchange between Thomas Jayat, rector of Bury (instituted the previous year), described as of the household (*familiaris*) of the King, and John Goodyng, of the household of the Bishop of Norwich and rector of Newton near Bury in that diocese. Rede replied politely, pointing out that this meant depriving him of his right of collation to Bury and adding that Thomas had received from the executors of his predecessors £20 but had spent nothing on repairs or for the good of his benefice. Moreover he was only in minor orders, had insolently refused instructions to study for higher orders, and by his gay clothing, failure to use the tonsure and practice of secular business made it clear that he had no intention of qualifying for the priesthood. However, if the Archbishop, knowing the facts, decided to proceed with the exchange he could do so.² And apparently he did, as John Goodyng was rector of Bury in 1419.

¹ *Reg. Simon de Gandavo* (Cant. and York Soc.), 776.

² *Suss. Rec. Soc.* viii, 47-52.

Part of the outbreak of exchanges with which we have been dealing was due to the existence of a body of lawyers who made money by negotiating such exchanges by fraud and misrepresentation. In 1391 Archbishop Courtenay issued from his Sussex manor of Slindon a letter to the bishops of his province.¹ In this he stated that there were certain 'sowers of tares' who were commonly known as 'Choppechurches,' who out of greed sometimes by trickery promoted the exchange of benefices of very unequal value, ruining those who thus acquired them under false colours, so that from being comfortably off they became wretched and reduced to great poverty. They also persuaded others to promise not to take the profits of the benefice but to give them up (surely only in part?) when told to. 'Thus whereas one church should suffice for one clerk, these men require the issues of a number of benefices which properly divided should support many good and learned men, who as a result suffer want. Thus the service of the Church suffers and her unpopularity not undeservedly increases.' Most of these 'Choppechurches' lived in London and he particularly ordered the Bishop of London to deal severely with them, to see that exchanges were only made between equivalent benefices, and that no such payments or promises were made.

In 1402 John Knotte, rector of Halton, complained to the papal court that he had exchanged that living, worth more than £16, for 'Westbere,' which Richard Crowley swore was worth £20, whereas it barely amounted to £5.13.4. Orders were given that if these facts were proved the exchange should be cancelled and Knotte restored to Halton.² About the same time William Syward, rector of 'Warstlyngworth' in the diocese of Lincoln appealed to the Lord Chancellor.³ His story was that one Master John Raundes, a notary, had drawn up a deed by which he, William, had made one John Hakkepenne, chaplain, his proctor to exchange his said church for some other benefice. To this instrument and the appointment of the proctor he had never given his assent, but by it the proctor had made him exchange his benefice for the church of St. Nicholas at Lewes, which is not worth 40s. He begged the Chancellor to enquire into the matter and do him justice, or he would be ruined. What was the outcome of his plea does not appear; but it seems strange that such a fraudulent exchange, which would have required the consent of the Bishops of Lincoln and Chichester and of the patrons of the two churches, could have been carried out quite without the knowledge of the suppliant.

¹ Wilkins, *Concilia*, iii, 215-7.

² *Cal. Papal Letters*, v, 472.

³ Early Chancery Proc. 68, no. 59.