

JOHN DE DROKENSFORD, BISHOP OF BATH AND WELLS

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III.

DROKENSFORD AND THE AVIGNON POPES.

The Register is full of items indicating the many demands of Pope John XXII, who was a Frenchman living at Avignon, anxious to persuade the English Bishops to send money for his various expenses and to provide benefices and prebendal stalls for his needy friends.⁵⁶ In 1322-3 the Pope wrote to the Archbishop and his suffragans regretting the war between Edward and Charles King of France, and in the next year Drokensford joined with other Bishops in a letter to the Pope asking for his mediation between France and England.⁵⁷ The capacity of the Pope to over-ride the ordinary executive of the Church and to insist on nominating to important offices led to a protest of Drokensford to Archbishop Reynolds in 1320. Neither the Bishop nor the Abbot of Glastonbury encouraged further than they were obliged this papal custom. On one occasion the Bishop filled in a stall in Wells, after waiting a month in case some nomination should come from the Pope. Obviously it would have been difficult for a letter to have been received in the time, unless the Pope had already bespoken the vacancy or one of his representatives in England had been in a position to fill it.

Obviously there was some feeling in the matter, for Drokensford felt it necessary to write an apology to seven separate cardinals in Rome. On another occasion the Abbot of Glastonbury made a very bold effort to refuse to admit a certain Thomas le Strong to the Monastery, and the Bishop supported his objection in a letter to the Pope.⁵⁸

Though a pluralist himself, Drokensford seems not to have approved of it in his parochial clergy, a thing sometimes necessitated by the scarcity of efficient priests. He combined with the Archbishop and other Bishops in a petition to the Pope, pointing out the need for ordaining more clergy to fill vacancies. He protested that in some cases foreigners had been instituted to livings and their ignorance of the language and customs of the country made it impossible for them to know the

"bleat" of their flock. The problem, he pointed out, was urgent.⁵⁹

The legative Constitutions of Otto and Ottobon forbade the use of undedicated churches and required that all Rectors of newly built churches must seek consecration within the year. Drokensford supported these instructions by ordering all offenders to be fined 10s. each.⁶⁰

In the Register there are three interesting instances of bloodshed in Churchyards and the Bishop's measures to deal with the situation. He asked the Abbot of Muchelney to enquire into the desecration of Martock by bloodshed and fisticuffs and sent him a supply of holy water with which to reconcile the cemetery.⁶¹ Similar troubles occurred at Bruton and Ilchester, and the Bishop advised similar remedies.

With two such famous establishments as Wells and Glastonbury so close together it would be surprising if from time to time rivalry did not ensue. A serious quarrel broke out between the Abbot of Glastonbury and the Dean of Wells, and the latter was accused in August, 1326, of firing Glastonbury Moor so that the Abbey might be burned. The Dean strenuously denied the charge and the Bishop apparently gave him the opportunity of clearing himself by bringing a collusive action against him.⁶²

In September, 1326, Drokensford had a Ban of Excommunication published against persons who had damaged sluices in his Manor of Wookey. The Ban was to be published in two churches on the Abbot of Glastonbury's estate, and was an offensive gesture aimed at the Abbot.

The estate belonging to the Dean of Wells at Zelemore in Wedmore was damaged in October, 1326, and buildings were destroyed and goods taken away in open daylight. The Bishop protests against persons of influence deceiving simple peasants and threatens excommunication.

It turned out that the culprits were two servants of Abbot Adam of Glastonbury and two monks, who had all thereby incurred excommunication. The Abbot and the four culprits were summoned to appear before a Consistory at Wells to answer the charges.⁶³

DEMANDS FOR MONEY.

There are many references to demands for money from various sources; from the Pope to pay for his crusading interests⁶⁴ and from the King for his Scottish wars. In fact

one-tenth of the Register is occupied with royal requests for money.⁶⁵

One example is specially interesting because it introduces one of the best-known Italian banking families of the Middle Ages. Drokensford wrote to the Dean and Chapter of Wells urging speedy collection of the Tenth granted by the clergy toward the costly Scottish Wars. The collectors replied that they already held a receipt for £200 from the banking company of Bardi, and that it would be impossible before next harvest to levy any more money on the incumbents, impoverished as they were by the bad harvest of the previous year.⁶⁶

Drokensford had to see to the collection of Peter's Pence, a tax to which every householder was liable, and which was assessed by the Pope for the diocese of Bath and Wells at £11 5s. He frequently stimulated the bounty of his people by encouragement and by promises of indulgences. One of the demands which he made was for money to repair the causeway across the moor from Polson to Bridgwater.⁶⁷ In connection with diocesan collectors an extremely interesting comment on Chaucer is provided by two notes giving the Bishop's views on relics. He orders that Papal messengers begging for money for hospitals in Rome may do so, but are not to exhibit *rotuli depicti*, relics or other *frivola*.⁶⁸ How different from the "pigges bones" of Chaucer's Prologue. A confirmation of our ideas about pilgrimages to what Chaucer calls "ferne halwes kowthe in sondry landes" is given by a note in the Register that William de Bath was given permission to visit the shrine of St. James of Compostella and other saints. It will be remembered that the good wife of Juxta Bathom had also been in Galicia at St. James. William was allowed four months to go there and back, a very short time unless like Chaucer's pilgrims there was an organised pilgrimage, and a ship had been specially chartered for the purpose.⁶⁹

PREACHING IN ENGLISH.

Other functions typical of the activities of a mediæval Bishop were provision for aged clergy, dispensations of various kinds, admissions to benefices and ordinations, which latter were very rare in this diocese under Drokensford. Bishop Hobhouse makes a very interesting point when he says that there is no record whatsoever in the Register of preaching by

the Bishop. He suggests that few Bishops of his class ever preached to their flocks. "It may well be doubted," he writes, "whether he could freely communicate with the people of his village-flocks in their mother-tongue. His correspondence was written in Latin. His communications with his bailiffs on manorial business were in French, and that was probably the daily language at his table, as it certainly was in all his intercourse with his sovereign and nobles, and in his utterances in Parliament and Synod."

Again to drag in Chaucer and the picture of mediæval life given in his poems, within 35 years of Drokensford's death, English was being used in schools and in the Law Courts, in Parliament and in social life, and writers were beginning to use it as a medium of composition, and it was soon to become possible for the Bible to be translated and read in the vernacular.

DROKENSFORD'S CHARITIES.

Bishop Hobhouse has a good word for Drokensford, who seems to have been energetic, kindly and business-like, even if he was too fond of litigation and nepotism. "All his faults are traceable to hastiness of temper and to warmth of heart, both contributing to overpower his judgment and his conscience; but he was also warm in his friendships, a peacemaker, and charitable to his numerous dependents—witness his frequent manumissions and his daily doles to two hundred needy ones."

From his manor at Dogmersfield Drokensford wrote in 1313 to his Bailiff of Wells, "Political troubles having hindered our residence hitherto and so withdrawn our alms-giving, and other duties, we now ordain that for the rest of our episcopate 40 of the poorest persons of Wells and Pucklechurch Bailewicks shall receive daily a silver farthing or its value in food. Worn out priests to be admitted, and preference given to such of our serfs or widows as have been driven by poverty to throw up their holdings and to beg. At Michaelmas to such of the 40 as survive, 4s. is to be given for a cloak, hood and shoes. We charge the succentors to oversee this distribution. The priests and other recipients are to offer specified devotions, as herein specified, regulated according to their ability."

Similar letters were sent to the Bailiff of Chew, the Vicars of Congresbury and Yatton, to the Bailiff of Wellington (including

Wiviliscombe); to Bancock (including Cheddar); and to Kingsbury (including Chard) making a total of recipients of Drokensford's bounty of either 200 or 240 poor people.⁷⁰

He showed much consideration for old and poor serfs by releasing them from payment of capitage or chevagium or chevage, a servile recognition due from serfs to their lord.⁷¹

Another instance of his kindness is given by a grant from him as Lord of the Manor in Pirbright in Surrey of a tenement to Geoffrey de Stanes, his blacksmith (and to his heirs) for services past and to come.⁷²

Drokensford showed a firm attitude towards the King in demanding, in the name of "Him, through whom Kings reign," that Robert de Maundeville, Clerk, who had been imprisoned for money-debt in Newgate, London, should be released.⁷³

HIS STRUGGLE WITH THE CHAPTER OF WELLS.

There was a serious dispute between the Bishop and the Chapter of Wells as to the extent of the various jurisdictions held by them.⁷⁴ It was protracted, and in several aspects the claims of the Dean and Chapter seem to have been an encroachment on the normal privileges of a Bishop. Possibly the Bishop's habit of living away from Wells gave the resident chapter a chance of increasing its powers. Drokensford wrote from the Temple in London in July, 1321, evidently from his episcopal house, the *Hospitium*, to enquire how far the Cathedral dignitaries were free from his jurisdiction, what were the limits of the Dean's rights and the value of the ecclesiastical ornaments which were in dispute. It is recorded that this dispute for once made him angry and he grievously lost his temper. But he wrote to the Chapter, yielding to them on all points with some reservations, and admitting their claim to the fruits of vacant benefices, their wonted jurisdiction over city and prebendal parishes, and the wonted jurisdiction of the three Archdeacons of Bath, Wells and Taunton.

On 28th September, 1321, the Bishop made a final settlement with the Dean and Chapter, in which they made some slight concessions. He ratified the agreements mentioned above, provided to do justice to the Dean for the compounding of his cattle on Cheddar Moor, agreed to dismiss the "malefactors" in his service, and to give satisfaction to God, the Church and the injured before Michaelmas. He also gave his bond for

£23 6s. 8d. for two mitres which he had borrowed, and these were to be restored at his death or before if possible. He repaid £6 13s. 4d. for a pastoral staff, £2 10s. for gloves *cum nodis aureis* and sandals, and a gold ring with a sapphire. It has been suggested that these items of episcopal wear had been borrowed for him to "sit" for his recumbent effigy, which was to be placed on his tomb after his death. All the undertakings he confirmed on 15th December, 1321.

DROKENSFORD'S NEPOTISM.

Bishop Hobhouse writes frankly:—"This charge the Register establishes beyond all doubt. He brought discredit and reproof upon himself by the shameless promotion of his nephews, whilst disqualified by non-age and ignorance." He had several brothers and nephews and one niece, Maria de Drokensford, who married John de Clevedon,⁷⁵ son of Sir Matthew de Clevedon, and was given a dowry in Shippam, near Cheddar Gorge. John was eventually knighted and was appointed Senechal and Bishop's Steward by Drokensford and was nephew of the Sir John de Clevedon who built Clevedon Court, about the year 1321. A considerable portion of the old house is still in existence, including the entrance hall, the great dining hall, the justice room, kitchen, courtyard, portcullis-groove and Chapel; and it is the central nucleus of the present home of the Eltons, famous for its association with Henry and Arthur Hallam, with Tennyson and with Thackeray,⁷⁶ and for the Elton ware.

Drokensford's nephew Michael,⁷⁷ son of his brother Michael, he collated to a stall at Wells in 1316. He was also appointed Rector of Chedzoy, but this office was taken away from him and he was granted a house in the Close of Wells.

Drokensford's brother Richard was collated a Canon in 1313 and was appointed Chancellor of Wells, but he died in 1316.

Possibly the worst case of nepotism was that of his nephew, Andrew, son of Philip de Drokensford. He was tonsured by his uncle in October, 1317, and when the prebend of Gattan fell vacant in 1322, the Bishop gave it to his nephew, who was only an acolyte, and on 22nd March issued a mandate for his installation to John de Godelee, Dean of Wells.

A week after the beginning of this bad piece of nepotism there occurred another very discreditable job. It was at Easter,

1322, when within two days a certain Richard de Golton was ordained acolyte and sub-deacon and was appointed Rector of Butleigh.

Going back to Andrew, we find that on 14th April he was present at a meeting of the Chapter and in the same month gave his proxy for the Rectory of St. Mangan in Cornwall.

On 7th August the Bishop wrote to the Dean and Chapter to say that, as his kinsman Andrew was studying at the University, he had appointed three Canons to pay certain dues to the Chapter arising out of the vacancy of the Prebend. In March, 1323, Canon Andrew de Drokensford was witness to a deed signed at Wiveliscombe, where the Bishop was staying, and on 1st September, 1323, Andrew de Drokensford, Prebendary of Yatton, appeared in Chapter and acknowledged himself bound to the Dean in a sum of more than £45, levied of goods of the late prebendary. After this time he seems to have vacated the prebend, which perhaps had been given him merely to pay for his stay at Oxford, and it was given to Richard de Thistledon, and later, by the King's orders, to Robert de Baldock, Archdeacon of Middlesex and Chancellor of England.

However, on 19th October, 1326, Bishop John de Drokensford instituted to the prebend of Yatton another nephew, Master Richard de Drokensford. Baldock had probably resigned his prebend, but did not survive long, for being a close friend of Edward II he shared his fate and was killed in London on 24th May, 1327.

On 30th May, 6 days after Baldock's death, the Bishop once again instituted his nephew Richard to the prebend of Yatton. On 14th June the Bishop or his nephew arranged for the increase of the Vicar of Yatton's stipend. Hitherto the Prebendary as Rector had received 100 marks, and the Vicar only 12 marks with two chaplains to support. Though still only an acolyte, Richard was appointed precentor of Wells Cathedral, an office for which he is not reported as having any specific qualifications. Meantime the Pope appointed two clerics to the prebend which he evidently thought was vacant, Thomas de Trillek,⁷⁸ nephew to Adam de Orleton, Bishop of Worcester, and Adam de Conisburgh. By 11th December the former was in possession and held his stall till 1341, but Adam de Conisburgh became Provost of Wells, so that finally both of the Pope's nominees were provided with benefices.

SAILORS AT HOME AND ABROAD.

There are a number of isolated items in the Registry showing the widespread interests of a mediæval Bishop. Drokensford wrote in 1321 to his good friends the Barons of the Cinque Ports, with regard to scuffles on the coast, asking them to dismiss their rancour towards the seamen of Hampshire and Devon, and inviting them to ward off foreign foes. It was deplorable to find Englishmen stirring up domestic broils.⁷⁹

On 20th August, 1319, he wrote from Drokensford to the Duke of Brittany, complaining that the Breton sailors had been trespassing on the coast of Somerset, probably in the Bishop's Manor of Winterstoke, in Bridgwater Bay. The sailors had been arrested and the Bishop suggested that it would be a pity if war should come about through the misbehaviour of these Bretons, and that it would be better to disown them and leave them to justice.⁸⁰

Sir Alan Ploknet earned his Bishop's displeasure in 1315, when he assaulted the rural dean of Crewkerne, seized him by the throat and squeezed out blood, and then made him swallow the Bishop's monetary letter with the wax seal.

Sir Alan apologised for his violence and explained that he had not recognised the rural dean, who had voluntarily swallowed the letter from terror. He asked for pardon and absolution, which was granted by Drokensford.⁸¹

A last item of interest is the pawning by the Bishop in 1329 of his mitre with six kinds of precious stones to Adam de Exeter, citizen of London, for £100.⁸²

DROKENSFORD'S DEATH AND CHARACTER.

Not long before he died, the Bishop endowed a chantry in Wells Cathedral at the altar nearest to where his grave should be, with the rent of a house by Horsepool Lane, and other lands in Wells, lately belonging to Odilla, wife of the fisherman, payable to Stephen de Kynaston, priest collated for life to celebrate Mass daily for the souls of the Bishop, of Dean John de Godelee and of Odilla's kindred. The Dean and Chapter were to nominate chaplains with one month's lapse to the Bishop. The chalice and vestments given by the Bishop were to be in the Chaplain's charge and were to be renewed by him together with other *onera*. The deed was to be writ in *martilogoï*, obviously an abbreviation for *martyrologium*, a list of services due to

the departed kept in all collegiate and in many parish churches.⁸³

This was issued on 17th March, 1328-9, from his manor house of Dogmersfield in Hampshire where he died in the following May, leaving his brother Philip as heir.⁸⁴

Drokensford is a typical Bishop of the period, one of the Caesarean type denounced by Wycliffe. He was worldly and self-seeking, a sad nepotist and devoid of the qualities which an ideal Father in God should possess. But he was a competent man of affairs, magnificent and generous, and he attracts us by his obvious affection for his mother and the church where he was baptised, by his patronage of the building of the great Central Tower at Wells, with the consequent need for the unique inverted arches; and, by helping in the lovely Lady Chapel, that provides so beautiful a termination to the east end of the Cathedral, he has contributed in no small degree to the adornment of what some of the greatest lovers of Gothic architecture regard as the most magnificent achievement of the Middle Ages.

NOTES

56. Hobhouse, *op. cit.*, p. 318.
57. *Op. cit.*, p. 224.
58. *Op. cit.*, p. 209.
59. *Op. cit.*
60. *Op. cit.*
61. *Op. cit.*, p. 236.
62. *Op. cit.*, p. 264.
63. *Op. cit.*, 277, 278.
64. *Op. cit.*, pp. 5, 6, 24, III, 118, 129, 176.
65. *Op. cit.*, pp. 4, III, 120, 135.
66. *Op. cit.*, p. 4.
67. *Op. cit.*, p. 244.
68. *Op. cit.*, p. 141.
69. *Op. cit.*, p. 146.
70. *Op. cit.*, p. 161.
71. *Op. cit.*, pp. 67, 107.
72. *Op. cit.*, p. 7.
73. *Op. cit.*, p. 82.
74. *Op. cit.*, pp. 25, 191, 194, 233.
75. There are many references to this well-known family contained in the *Register* of Drokensford.
76. I have to thank Sir Ambrose Elton, Bart., for information relating to Clevedon Court.
77. Hobhouse, *op. cit.*, *passim*.
78. *Op. cit.*, p. 301.
79. *Op. cit.*, p. 190.
80. *Op. cit.*, p. 135.
81. *Op. cit.*, p. 89.
82. *Op. cit.*, p. 298.
83. *Op. cit.*, p. 302.
84. *Op. cit.*, p. 303.

APPENDIX

DROKENSFORD'S TOMB

See *Proceedings of the Somerset Archæological and Natural History Society*, Vol. LXVI, 1920. Paper by A. C. Fyer, *Monumental Effigies in Somerset*, Part VI.

Messrs. Prior and Garner, in their *Mediæval Figure Sculpture in England* feel sure that the effigy of Bishop John de Drokenford was made of Dundry stone in a Bristol atelier. It was probably made in the Bishop's lifetime; and the tomb and canopy were made in Wells from Doulting stone. It is of unusual design and the coats of arms and colouring are in unusually good condition. The canopy was thought to be in danger and was taken down in 1758. Bishop John borrowed some necessary episcopal apparel in 1321 and gave a bond in 1323 for its safe return to the Dean and Chapter. The head of the effigy is resting on a thick cushion, and the feet on a tawny lion. The hands were originally raised in prayer, but are lost, and the face has been badly damaged. The effigy is 5 ft. 8 ins. in length and rests on a slab 6 ft. 5 in. long. The table tomb is 2 in. longer and stands on a plinth 7 ft. 7 in. long. The tomb and effigy have been discussed in many archæological works and the whole thing was engraved by J. le Keux in 1823.