

JOHN DE DROKENSFORD, BISHOP OF BATH AND WELLS

BY NORMAN G. BRETT-JAMES, M.A., B.LITT., F.S.A.

II.

DROKENSFORD AS REGENT.

The Bishops, among them John de Drokensford, mediated in favour of peace between the conflicting parties, and secured a patched-up reconciliation before Christmas, 1312. But the necessary taxation irritated the towns and several meetings of Parliament were summoned in 1313. On 23rd May, Edward II and his wife Isabella went to France for the coronation of the King of Navarre, leaving Drokensford as Regent⁴⁴ of the Kingdom and giving him a commission to open Parliament along with Reynolds (promoted from Worcester to Canterbury by a scandalous bargain between Edward and Pope Clement V), the Earl of Gloucester and John of Brittany, Earl of Richmond. This was the second Parliament of the year and it met on 8th July, and to it came, as one of the Knights of the Shire for Middlesex, Richard le Rous, late Lord of the Manor of Hendon, who had just exchanged, with the Convent of Westminster, Hendon for Hodford. During his absence attending Parliament, Drokensford appointed two Canons to visit the secular and regular clergy, giving them power during his absence to correct, enquire and deprive.⁴⁵

THE DESPENSERS AND LANCASTER.

The King soon returned from France, and, in the next year, being entirely unsupported by Lancaster and his party in an attempt to relieve Stirling Castle still in English hands, he was defeated and disgraced by Robert Bruce at Bannockburn.

This national disaster was accompanied and followed by several years of death and pestilence, by iniquitous extravagance on the part of the King, by much damage done by bands of

brigands who haunted the countryside, and by several outbreaks of civil war. At last peace was made between the contending baronial parties, the ordinances were confirmed and a new council nominated. Several of Drokensford's friends were appointed to the Council, but again he was not included, in spite of his prominence as Regent and as Commissioner for the opening of Parliament. In 1316 Drokensford was summoned to attend the King's Council but excused himself owing to pressure of business, distance from London and sickness; and, when asked by the Archbishop to assist in the consecration of Hotham as Bishop of Ely, he excused himself as over busy.

Edward II had learned little from the fate of Gaveston, and soon the Despensers, father and son, were occupying much the same position as the ill-fated Gascon, though it must be admitted that they were both men of a finer type than their predecessor. The antagonism of the Barons was more discreet than formerly, and a constitutional attack was made on the favourites in the Parliament of 1321 and a demand made for their dismissal.

Drokensford was asked in 1321 by the King for an expression of opinion as to the recall of the Despensers, and he sent an apology from his Manor of Wiveliscombe in Somerset for his non-attendance at the Council in London.⁴⁶ The notice had been too short to allow him to make the necessary arrangements, and so he had sent proctors to represent him. He felt unwilling to dissent from the Council's conclusions, and wished to agree with the King and his best advisers. More overt disturbances broke out, and Drokensford, who was somewhat implicated in the rebellion's move against Edward, endeavoured to mediate between King and Barons, but without success. Edward, with unwonted vigour, attacked and defeated Lancaster at Boroughbridge. Lancaster suffered the fate of Gaveston and was executed by the King's orders. Drokensford's sympathies were clearly with Lancaster, and five years later, on 4th May, 1327, he wrote with 15 other Bishops to the Pope, asking him to canonise Thomas of Lancaster, who had always been a loyal supporter of the Church and whose saintly life was attested by remarkable miracles performed at his tomb.⁴⁷ The letter was sent from York, where a Parliament was sitting, but the request cannot be regarded as official seeing that no abbots signed the petition, and the Pope did not see his way to grant it. Soon after the execution of Lancaster, so tragic in its consequences,

a Parliament held at York, at which Drokensford was present, propounded the vital principle, "*Quod tangit omnes, ab omnibus approbetur*," "What concerns all shall be approved by all."

In the same year, 1322, the King wrote to Drokensford for more money for the very costly Scottish wars which he was projecting. The Bishop replied that he had already collected a most satisfactory contribution, but that in the disturbed state of the country it would be dangerous to send the money to York, where the King was keeping his headquarters. Should he send the money to the Sheriff of Somerset or to London?

The King replied that £100 was to be given to the Friar Preachers of Langley for them to bring, and the balance of about the same value was to be sent to York.⁴⁸

EDWARD DEPOSED.

Drokensford was not the only Bishop to be implicated in the late rebellion, Henry, Bishop of Lincoln, and Adam Orleton, Bishop of Hereford were both hostile to the King and the latter Bishop was friendly to the Mortimer family, his neighbours on the Welsh marches. The King was indignant at the attitude of Drokensford and his friends, and sent John Stratford, afterwards Bishop of Winchester and Archbishop of Canterbury, to Avignon to complain of their behaviour. But Stratford intrigued for his own hand in Avignon, secured the favour of the Pope, and returned to head the opposition to the King.⁴⁹ Edward was going from bad to worse, and his failure to deal with the Scots and a complete incapacity to maintain order or levy sufficient taxes to carry on affairs of State were succeeded by an open breach with the Queen. Isabella went to France, ostensibly to treat with her brother, the King, with regard to Gascony, and there met Roger Mortimer, who was in exile.

During her absence Drokensford was one of the Bishops who ineffectually urged her to return to her husband. The Queen returned to England with Mortimer and soon secured enough support to be able to seize and execute the Despensers. A Parliament was summoned to meet on 7th January, 1327, and at this, as at the second Parliament of 1313, there were two Hendonians present, Drokensford as Bishop of Bath and Wells, and his friend, Henry de Bydik, of whose son, Thomas, one of the Drokensford family was guardian. Bydik was the second

of the free tenants in the Black Survey of Hendon for 1321, and on this occasion, as in several other Parliaments, he was one of the Knights of the Shire for Middlesex.

This Parliament was an extremely important one, for it took the momentous step of deposing Edward II from the throne and of choosing his young son in his place. When the young Edward was led into Westminster Hall, only four Bishops protested against the deposition of the King, and Drokensford was not among them. He took the oath at the Guildhall to support the Queen, and her son, and soon afterwards he seems to have retired to his diocese for good.

It will be clear that to discuss fully the part played by Drokensford would really need a complete survey of the reign of Edward II, but enough has been said to show how important a political figure he was. Before we leave the question of his position in national life, we may notice that on 8th February, 1327, a note was sent to the Treasurer and the Barons of the Exchequer not to compel John de Drokensford to recite the account of the Wardrobe, but to regard it as rendered.⁵⁰ On the 3rd July he was summoned to Lincoln in connection with the Scottish wars.

WELLS CENTRAL TOWER AND LADY CHAPEL.

Let us now consider Drokensford's relation to Wells Cathedral, where he was Bishop for a period of twenty years, one of the finest epochs of Decorated Architecture, during which there were built at Wells the glorious central Tower and Lady Chapel. The lower part of the Tower to the level of the roof is Early English, but the two upper stages are Decorated. They are in a large measure the work of John de Godelee, the Dean, who began the work in 1315 and finished it in 1321. Drokensford contributed to the cost of the central Tower, which proved too heavy for the roof and arches at the crossing. Consequently three pairs of arches had to be constructed to support the Tower, the upper ones being inverted, and the angles being pierced with circles which occupy the spandrels and prevent the structure from being a mere inert mass of masonry. The ingenuity of these buttresses "arrested the fall of the central Tower in the 14th century, and has kept its walls ever since in perfect security, so that the great structure has stood like a rock upon the watery soil of Wells for six centuries, with the

rents and breaks as they were when the damage was first repaired."

The Lady Chapel was also built during the bishopric of Drokensford, but here again Dean John de Godelee is entitled to much, if not most of the credit. It is octagonal, with the three western sides open to the retrochoir, and has a beautiful roof with clustered columns holding up the roof. There are splendid decorated windows, each of five lights, some containing glorious 14th century glass, mainly fragmentary but of wonderful colouring.

Enthusiastic writers say of it that it has provided externally the most beautiful East end to be found in England, "a thing beyond criticism or praise, an immortal and perfect loveliness." Francis Bond calls it an intuition of genius which "makes the vistas in the retro-choir and Lady Chapel a veritable glimpse into fairyland," while Edward Hutton says that "here is an effect unique in England and perhaps in the world. From the Choir we look through three marvellous arches into a wonderland of light and air, a heaven upheld by four palm trees of marble and of stone, or are they the stalks of lilies that flower there and burst into blossom, upholding the house of Our Lady?" To the cost of the Central Tower and Lady Chapel Drokensford contributed, and he is himself commemorated by a worthy monument in the south-east transept, at the entrance to the Chapel of St. Katherine.

DROKENSFORD'S PLURALITY.

Before being elected Bishop of Bath and Wells, John de Drokensford held a number of benefices, most of which he resigned. He was Chaplain to the Pope; Canon of Wells, Lichfield and Lincoln; Prebendary of the following Collegiate Churches in Yorkshire and Durham:—Masham, Darlington, Auckland and Chester-le-Street; Rector of Drokensford in Hampshire, of Hemingsburgh and Stillingford in Yorkshire and of Balsham in Cambridgeshire. After going to Wells, he still retained some Irish prebends, to which he had been collated, and enjoyed their revenues. It is probably true that his position was typical of the times, and if so it provides confirmation of many of the complaints which reformers made with regard to the self-seeking of many of the higher clergy. Other instances will occur when we come to discuss the various items in the Episcopal Register.

RECTOR OF DROXFORD.

It seems clear that John was Rector of Droxford⁵⁴ and lived in the Rectory or Manor House then on the site of the present handsome and commodious Georgian Rectory. Several of the documents preserved in his Register are dated from there, and the earliest of these is a letter to his Bailiff, written in French and headed "*Une lettere aux Bailiff,*" bidding him pay out of the fruits of his Church at Drokensford for his life to the sacrist of St. Swithin's at Winchester (that is the Cathedral) ten silver marks less one for the tenth. This is dated Droxford 31st January, 1309-10.

He was also at Drokensford in May, 1310, when he issued a dispensation and a sequestration, and in August of the same year, when he sent to all the Rectors and Incumbents in the Diocese, announcing that Bath Priory, of which he was Abbot, was sending proctors to beg for its Cathedral fabric. They were to be admitted after Mass on festivals and the whole of the collection was to be given to them.

In August of 1311 and July of 1312 he was also at Drokensford, and on the latter occasion he sent letters dealing with a papal Judge, who had delegated the hearing of an ecclesiastical case to the Archdeacon of Taunton.

DROKENSFORD'S REGISTER AND RESIDENCES.

Bishop John de Drokensford left behind him an episcopal register covering the 20 years of his episcopate and filled with all kinds of interest dealing with the various activities of a typical mediaeval bishop.

The Register has been edited for the Somerset Records Society by Bishop Hobhouse, and from it are here extracted some of the most interesting episodes. It contains on its 306 folios a vast mass of information as to the official doings of a busy, restless travelling Bishop, who had sixteen manor houses always ready for his arrival with a considerable retinue. There was the Palace at Wells, which does not seem to have been used by Drokensford; and when he was officially employed in Bath he resided at Calverton or possibly at Bathampton. He had, besides, official houses at Banwell, Blackford, Congresbury, Chew, Evercreesh, Kingsbury, Wellington, Westbury, Wookey, Yatton and Wiveliscombe, all in Somerset, and the latter his favourite place of residence. There were Manor Houses available at Cheddar and Cranmore, but it is not clear if they

were kept ready for his occupation. He had an official residence at Dogmersfield in Hampshire, private houses at Wanton, Rockborne and Weyhill, one at Stockwell in Surrey and one at Greenwich in Kent, as well as an official home in the Strand near Temple Gate. From nearly all these places documents recorded in the Register are dated.

There are two notes of September, 1320:—one sent to the reeves and tenants of the Manor inherited by Sir Matthew de Clevedon in Yeovilton, of which he has made John de Pucklechurch guardian, this being written in French; the other in Latin sent to two Canons instructing them to examine the complaints of the parishioners of Hardington against their Rector. These two are dated from Hyndon and Hynedon respectively, either Hendon in Wiltshire or in Somerset, and probably not Hendon in Middlesex. If he was dating two letters from Hendon it suggests a house there, unless he was stopping at the New Hall just built for the Abbot of Westminster, as related in the Black Survey of 1321.⁵¹

OFFICIALS OF THE DIOCESE.

The Bishop appointed as a staff to visit his diocese three Archdeacons, of Wells, Bath and Taunton respectively, each with his court, of the type that was to become notorious half a century later in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. The diocese was divided into twelve Deaneries, and in their chapters to which all incumbents were summoned, subsidies, Peter's pence and Tenths were granted.

For purposes of discipline, the most important officer was called the Official, but there was also an Apparitor-General and various Commissaries, appointed for specific purposes, and granted judicial powers of hearing and deciding cases and even of execution of sentence.

Drokensford rarely visited Wells, and found the Chapter there definitely hostile and sometimes defiant, though he was generally on good terms with his Dean, John de Godelee. He was, as Bishop, Abbot of the Monks of Bath Abbey, and frequently had trouble with the Prior whose administration he mistrusted as wasteful.

THE MEDIÆVAL CHURCH.

From the Register we glean a number of items which tend to confirm the views expressed by Chaucer in his *Canterbury Tales*

as to the many failings of the mediæval church. The clergy of the various parishes, in Somersetshire as elsewhere, left something to be desired and were beginning to justify the severe criticisms which were later on to be made by Wycliffe, John Ball and Piers Plowman, and in his gently satiric manner by Chaucer himself. Bishop Hobhouse points out, in his scholarly introduction to Drokensford's *Register*, that the recruits for the ministry were frequently serfs who on the day of their manumission were granted the tonsure and then generally left to pick up what education they could in minor orders.⁵² Another source of candidates was found in the sons of well-to-do folk, who were frequently granted benefices, the funds of which were often used to keep the boy-rector at the University. For one Somerset Rector ten marks were granted annually towards his expenses at Oxford, the balance being kept back to provide a curate for his parish.⁵³

Nearly a century before, in 1237, Pope Boniface had attempted to stem the tide of these careless methods, often savouring of favouritism or nepotism, and Drokensford, who had, as we shall see, an over-indulgent regard for his nephews, frequently evaded the restraints which had been made. He earned a well-merited censure from Archbishop Reynolds for collating to a prebendal stall in Wells a mere boy, who was not even tonsured, Ivo de Berkeley, the son of Sir Maurice de Berkeley. The Archbishop appointed his own *Dean of Arches* to the stall and ordered obedience under pain of suspension. This occurred in 1311 and 1312 when the Bishop was new to his post, but he carried on his nepotism all through his episcopal career.

This system of non-resident vicars and rectors led, as has been indicated, to the appointment of curates, with slender qualifications and small pay, sometimes quite unable to fulfil the duties entrusted to them, especially those for "the guidance of the conscience through the confessional." They were not expected to preach, and in many cases their lack of education would make it impossible for them to do so. On the whole Drokensford made some effort to satisfy himself as to the qualifications of these curates and sometimes examined them before licensing them to their cures. G. G. Coulton, in *The Black Death*,⁵⁴ writes of the diocese of Bath and Wells, whose records he has carefully examined, that "the large majority of livings in lay presentation, before the plague, went to men who were not yet

in priest's orders; in fact, a considerable proportion . . . were not even in Holy Orders at all. . . . They could not administer any valid sacrament except that of baptism . . . only 36.2 per cent. . . . were actually qualified to celebrate Mass or to rehearse the Marriage Service or to administer the last rites to a dying man. Evidently, therefore, there existed a large class of rectors who took the money, but did not do the parish work, side by side with a class of curates or 'chaplains,' as they were called, whom these rectors hired to do their work, and whom they naturally preferred to hire in the cheapest market." Not all these poor parsons had the character and zeal and thorough appreciation and practice of Christian ideals which were so striking a feature of Chaucer's Poor Parson. He dwelt at home and kept with his flock, though his parish was wide and the houses far asunder, endeavouring to draw them to heaven by good ensample

"Cristes gospel trewely wolde he preche
His parishers devoutly wolde he teche."

He was generous in his collection of tithe, and did not, like the non-resident rectors mentioned above, set his benefice to hire and leave his sheep encumbered in the mire, while he ran to St. Paul's in London "to seken hym a chaunterie for soule."

It should be said to Drokensford's credit that in furtherance of his campaign to secure more regular ministration for the various parishes in his diocese, he wrote in 1323 from Stockwell to his Official and Treasurer, protesting against non-residence and the practice of vicars resorting to London instead of to places of study. He gave almost hundreds of permits to go to the University for study, and protested that in many instances men cast off all clerical dress and morals and allowed hospitality and almsgiving to decay in their parishes, and the fabrics of their churches to deteriorate.

One very flagrant instance was the granting by Bishop Drokensford of the Rectory of Merriott to Philip Bernadini, son of the well-known Florentine money-lender. He was to be allowed two years study *ubicunque*, and probably never intended to serve his English benefice.

Drokensford had severely to reprimand Richard le Halle, Rector of Chew, for absence in London and thus forsaking his flock. He was ordered to return to his parish within a month.⁵⁶

How different was Chaucer's Poor Parson, when he earns the finest encomium pronounced, that—

“Cristes loore and his Apostles twelve
He taughte and first he folwed it hymself.”

TRAVELLING FRIARS.

As a result of the inefficiency of many of the parochial clergy there was the famous papal decree of 1274 insisting that Rectors must take priests' orders within two years of their institution, and the Bull, *Super Cathedram*, which sanctioned the appointment of a limited number of specially selected Friars to travel round a diocese, and to preach and hear confessions independently of the parish priest. Drokensford, in pursuance of these arrangements, licensed temporary confessors within given areas, and even granted to certain families the right to choose their own confessor. It is easy to find confirmation of Chaucer's impression of a Friar, who “had power of confessionn, as said himselfe, more than a curat.” Chaucer's Friar sweetly heard confession and gave easy and pleasant absolution, and his Pardoner was able to preach so effectively as to “winne silver” from his congregation. Nearly all Chaucer's points are effectively confirmed in Drokensford's Register. In 1318 Drokensford granted to six Friars Minor of Bridgwater licenses to preach and hear confessions throughout the diocese for one year and in 1321 and 1325 he licensed the Prior and certain Friars of the Carmelite order at Bristol in a similar way. On several occasions Drokensford granted permission to wealthy residents in the Diocese to hear Mass in their own houses so long as the illness, from which they suffered, should continue.

Drokensford, as Bishop, was not responsible for all the monastic bodies within his diocese. The Benedictines and Augustinians, however, came under his jurisdiction and he had great difficulties to contend with when he visited Bath and Glastonbury. His enquiries were thwarted by a conspiracy of silence, so during Lent of 1313 he pronounced excommunication on all who withheld the truth, first at Bath Priory and then at Glastonbury Abbey, and warned them that “illicit oaths of secrecy, made to defeat correction” were illegal. He annulled the oaths and pronounced sentence on all who joined in these oaths or refused to answer his enquiries.

MONASTIC CONDITIONS.

There were several smaller monasteries, such as Athelney, Worspring, Bruton, Keynsham, Muchelney and Stavordale, which Drokensford visited and found in some disorder and in all great poverty, the result of mismanagement. The nunneries of Barrow, Buckland, Cannington and Ilchester were in even worse condition and required the severest measures of correction. There was one alien priory in Somerset at Stoke Currey which Drokensford visited in 1326, and if it was in any way typical it justified much of what has been alleged against the monks of that day. He wrote to the Mother-house of Lonley that "having found, on visitation, your Priory impoverished and neglected, containing the Prior and one monk, some servants and useless folk sojourning there by your leave, the other monks living lecherously abroad. . . . We decree that the sinning monks be sent to Lonley for correction, and that no more be sent to the Priory until it be re-instated."

Drokensford gave permission in 1313 to the Prioress of Canyngton to admit boarders to her convent in spite of a general prohibition of such arrangements. In 1314 he allowed the wife and two sisters of John Fychat to be boarded there, though he specifically ordered that the convents should not be made too comfortable and pleasant. This practice of taking boarders resembled the state of things at the nunnery at Stratford-atte-Bowe, where Chaucer's Prioress is thought to have lived. Drokensford had other dealings with the nuns of Canyngton especially in reference to a disputed election of a Prioress in 1317.

Drokensford issued in 1317 a decree of penance against Brother Thomas le Taverner, a rebel Canon of Worspring Priory, between Clevedon and Weston, now in ruins, with Tower, hall, chapel and barns used for farm purposes. The offender was to be imprisoned or rather incarcerated until penitent, and he was to be reduced to the lowest rank and to undergo penalties of fasting, devotions, silence and scourging. Canon Lundrais, who had offended in a similar manner, was to be treated to similar penances. After a short time Taverner was removed to a priory at Bruton. A further example of the same kind of treatment is supplied in the case of an Augustinian Canon of Taunton Priory convicted of incontinence. The Bishop sent him to the Abbot of the sister Abbey of Keynsham

for the fulfilment of the allotted penances. The Abbot is urged to treat the culprit wisely and to adjust the penalties to suit his contrition.

NOTES

44. T. F. Tout, *Edward II.*
45. T. F. Tout, *op. cit.*
46. Hobhouse, *op. cit.*, pp. 199-200.
47. *Op. cit.*, p. 282.
48. See pp. 4, 111, 120, 135, 205.
49. Tout, *op. cit.*
50. *Close Rolls*, 1327-30, p. 37 and p. 224.
51. Hobhouse, *op. cit.*, pp. xviii and xix, pp. 16, 29, 33, 44, 52, 60 (esp. p. 29), 145.
52. Instances of the granting of the tonsure to serfs on the day of their manumission occur in Hobhouse, Drokensford's *Register*, pp. 40, 91, 96, 113, 139, 191, 242, 257, 259.
53. Many excuses to study at Oxford and elsewhere occur on pp. 47, 85, 99, 190, 304-309.
54. G. G. Coulton, *The Black Death* (Benn).
55. Hobhouse, *op. cit.*, pp. 246, 244, and *passim*.