

The Last Abbot of Leicester

by Terence Y. Cocks

One of the most turbulent times of ecclesiastical history in this country was undeniably the Reformation period in the sixteenth century; in Leicestershire, as elsewhere, one of the greatest early impacts must have been that caused by the dissolution of the monasteries. The local monastic houses were all yielded up unhesitatingly by their heads, the principal of whom was John Bouchier, Abbot of St. Mary of the Meadows (St. Mary de Pratis), better known as Leicester Abbey, the largest monastery in the county and one of the richest houses of Augustinian or Austin canons in the kingdom.

Most local writers appear to have assumed that Abbot Bouchier, like the majority of the dispossessed abbots and priors, retired into obscurity to enjoy his pension; but in fact he was to have an unusually long and varied career after surrendering his abbey. His name does not figure in *The Dictionary of National Biography*, and in the few instances when he is mentioned in local history he appears as a weak and servile creature of Thomas Cromwell, which is certainly borne out by his letters to Cromwell. Professor A. Hamilton Thompson, in his history of Leicester Abbey,¹ gives some details of Bouchier's brief term of office, but no particulars of his later career; John Nichols in *The History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester*² refers to his hopes of a bishopric under Queen Mary (though without mentioning the actual see), his being in exile by January 1577, and a pardon which the historian mistakenly thought was granted to him in 1584. Writers in *The Victoria History of the County of Leicester* allude to John Bouchier, Abbot of Leicester, deprived 1538,³ and to John Bowserre or Bourcher, Rector of Church Langton, deprived 1570,⁴ apparently without realising that these names refer to the same person; but pension lists for the diocese of Lincoln prove the deprived rector's identity with the former abbot. His life had been of some interest in the meantime, as twice he had come close to obtaining a bishopric, and other pieces of information can be discovered from various sources. Rather surprisingly, these details do not all seem to have been set down in one place previously (except for an earlier short article by the present writer in the *Leicester Cathedral Quarterly*⁵); they indicate that Bouchier found he could adapt himself to the times until 1570, when he finally stood firm for his beliefs. They also illustrate the vagaries of life to which a cleric might be subject in those days.

The obscurity surrounding the ex-abbot is partly due to the many variations of his surname used in contemporary documents. This was frequently the case in late medieval and Tudor times; the name Bouchier seems to have been subject to some twenty different renderings, several of which will be quoted in this article. The abbot seems to have had no connection with the noble family of that name, the head of which was the Earl of Essex. Much uncertainty exists about his academic career. *The Eton College Register*⁶ and *Alumni Cantabrigienses*⁷ state that he was born at Oakington near Cambridge, was a King's Scholar at Eton c.1506-11, entered King's College, Cambridge, 1511, at the age of eighteen and left about 1512. In *Athenae Cantabrigienses*⁸ he is listed as having moved from King's to

St. John's College but as having apparently left the University without taking a degree. Thomas Baker's manuscript *History of St. John's College, Cambridge*⁹ does not help matters by confusing John Bouchier with a contemporary, Thomas Bouchier, an Observant Franciscan of Greenwich who retired abroad after Queen Mary's death and died at Rome, and describes the Abbot as having presented the College with a silver cup, which was in fact the gift of Thomas; though a marginal note in the manuscript adds 'E'pus electus Glocestr.', which does refer to Abbot John. Later references elsewhere indicate that at some time he did proceed to a degree, but the Cambridge records of this period, including college registers and degree lists, are incomplete.

If John Bouchier was aged eighteen in 1511 he must have been born late 1492 or in 1493, and would thus have been about forty years old when he became abbot of Leicester. This would also mean that he received his first and only parish at sixty-one, a considerable age at that time; was nominated to a bishopric at sixty-five and had the energy to uproot himself and go into exile at about seventy-eight, dying perhaps some ten years later. Although this at first seems unlikely, it might, however, be explained by the religious uncertainties and changes of the times.

By April 1532 John Bouchier was an Augustinian canon at St. Bartholomew's Priory, Smithfield, London, and seems to have been a prominent member of the community. In that month the Prior, William Bolton, died; the sub-prior, Thomas Gibbons, afterwards made a detailed report of the subsequent proceedings for the Bishop of London.¹⁰ On 9th April 1532 the canons signed the formal petition for permission to elect a successor, and this document was carried to the King by John Symkyns, cellarer, and John Bowser, canon. (Here we meet the first variation of the surname 'Bouchier'.) One of the canons, the sacristan, Thomas Bilbarowe, was absent, sick in the infirmary, and named John Bowser to act as his proxy at the election.

The election was, in fact, a mere formality. Hardly had Prior Bolton departed this life before Robert Fuller, Abbot of Waltham, began making overtures to the King and Thomas Cromwell for the appointment, to be held *in commendam* with his own wealthy abbacy. On 22nd May he wrote to Cromwell and in his letter promised that Cromwell's good offices would be 'largely recompensed on my part, not only in reward for your labours, but also for such yearly remembrance as you shall have no cause to be sorry for'.¹¹ Cromwell, who must have amassed a considerable fortune from the receipt of bribes, evidently approved of this arrangement. When the election at Smithfield took place the canons chose the 'way of compromise', referring the matter to the Bishop of London and two of the King's chaplains and agreeing to accept their decision. These three, having presumably received their instructions, announced that their choice fell on Robert Fuller; Royal assent to his election as Prior was given on 2nd July 1532.

Robert Fuller was in a position to be of use to St. Bartholomew's and its canons. As mitred Abbot of Waltham he had a seat in the House of Lords, and his influence was increased by the fact that Henry VIII coveted certain lands belonging to the abbey, which he wished to obtain by exchange or gift. If the Abbot chose to try to obtain promotion for one of his canons he was therefore quite likely to succeed. E.A. Webb, the historian of St. Bartholomew's, writes 'probably at Fuller's instigation John Bourcheher or Bourcher was elected Abbot of St. Mary de Pratis, Leicester'.¹²

Certainly Fuller exerted himself to help the cellarer John Symkyns, who with Bowser (Bourcher) had carried the petition to the king in April. He wrote to Cromwell on the cellarer's behalf requesting, first, the abbacy of St Osyth's, Essex, and then the priory of St. Gregory's, Canterbury. Cromwell may have had Symkyns in mind when he wrote to ask Archbishop Cranmer's agreement to his nominee obtaining St. Gregory's. Cranmer's

reply showed his disapproval:

'I have resolved to prefer to this office, and all similar ones when void, a member of the same house, if fit, if not, the fittest one I can find.... I trust you will oppose the unseasonable ambition of men of the church, and consider how unreasonable a thing it is for any man to labour for his own promotion' (6th May 1533).¹³

The reforming archbishop's exhortation fell unheeded; was it likely that Cromwell would oppose the ambition of churchmen, when his pockets were being so well lined by their labouring for their own promotion? John Symkyns became Prior of St. Gregory's, writing in December 1533 to thank Cromwell.¹⁴ He was to surrender the priory in 1536, receiving a pension, and in 1541 he became a prebendary of Rochester Cathedral; deprived as a Protestant under Queen Mary in 1554, he regained his prebend in 1560 and retained it until his death in 1576,¹⁵ by which time his former colleague at Smithfield had left the country.

For many years kings and their advisers had largely dictated appointments of heads of the great monasteries, as, indeed, many nobles did for smaller houses in which they had an interest. By the reign of Henry VIII the elections were very often 'compromitted' as in the case of St. Bartholomew's; Henry's ministers Wolsey and Cromwell made abbots and priors at will, and bribery, nepotism and pluralism were openly practised. In these circumstances it is quite probable, firstly, that Abbot Fuller used his influence to gain the abbacy of Leicester for his canon John Bourchier; and, secondly, that Bourchier himself promised Thomas Cromwell a substantial bribe in return. No letters dating from before his appointment survive to provide evidence for these suggestions; but Fuller's support of Symkyns sets a precedent for the first, and Bourchier's later letters to Cromwell refer quite plainly to a sum of £100 and the lease of Leicester Abbey's Grange at Ingarsby as having been promised to him. It is also possible that Cromwell, looking a few years ahead, was already seeking out heads for the greater abbeys who seemed likely to be pliable in the event of future changes.

The Abbot of Leicester in 1532 was Richard Pexall (or Pecksall), who two years previously had made a fleeting appearance in history when he received Cardinal Wolsey and a few days later officiated at his burial in the abbey church. Pexall had been abbot since 1509 and had long ceased to be an effective head. It is evident from visitation reports that discipline had become alarmingly lax amongst the canons, although in recent years two of Pexall's subordinates had been chosen to be heads of other Augustinian houses. Many of the canons passed the time hunting, or drinking in alehouses in the town. At one visitation, in 1528, the prior preached the usual opening sermon from the text 'This is pure religion and undefiled before God'. This certainly could not be said to describe the state of the abbey, as hounds swarmed everywhere, fouling church, chapter house and cloister.¹⁶ The abbot had withdrawn himself from his brethren. He kept an indordinate number of servants; it was some years since he had celebrated mass in the abbey church, and when he did appear there he was sometimes accompanied by his fool, who distracted the service with 'jests and snatches of song'.¹⁷

Not surprisingly, Bishop Longland of Lincoln, in whose diocese Leicester lay, had for several years been endeavouring to secure Pexall's resignation or deprivation. In a letter to Cromwell dated 15th July 1532, from his manor house at Liddington, Rutland, he wrote indignantly:

'The man setteth more by his own wit now, and by such light counsel as he hath, than ever he did before. The place is almost undone by him, and the longer he tarrieth therein the more it shall decay.'¹⁸

Pexall was fully aware of his diocesan's opinion and had not the least intention of resigning without a struggle. Only six days before the date of the bishop's letter the wily old man

had himself written to Cromwell asking for his support and backing his plea with a bribe of £40 — ‘to use as you shall think best for my quietness in Christ’.¹⁹ The word ‘quietness’ constantly recurs in the abbot’s letters; on 14th October 1532 he wrote again to Cromwell:

‘I desire nothing in this world except to continue my life in quietness, as Master Richard, your nephew, can more plainly inform you. I send you two geldings, trusting hereafter to provide you with better.’²⁰

Pexall’s shortcomings, however, were too serious to be overlooked. Letters flew between Cromwell, Bishop Longland and the abbot, and eventually, after moaning ‘my brethren would be sorry to lose me’ and making anxious inquiries about his pension, the old man bowed to the inevitable and did resign, at some date between 26th December 1533 and 5th January 1534. On that day he penned another letter to Cromwell:

‘I have applied myself to accomplish what you propose in your letters, and thank you for your pains in the establishment of my living now in mine old age.’²¹

Pexall’s fall was comfortably cushioned, as will be seen from later comments by his successor.

Little time was lost in appointing that successor. On 14th January 1534 the *congé d’elire* for the election of a new Abbot of Leicester was issued at Westminster²² and on 29th January the election took place in the chapter-house; the unanimous choice of the canons fell on John Bouchier — it is probable that there was no other candidate and he was accepted as a Royal nominee.²³ For many years the abbots had been chosen from amongst the canons themselves, so this election represented a departure from custom. The prior, Richard Bromley, on 31st January formally petitioned for the Royal assent to the election, which was granted on 8th February 1534.²⁴ In this document the new abbot is named as ‘John Bourcheher alias Bouchcher’ (a curious variant) but the restitution of temporalities, issued at Westminster 28th February,²⁵ refers to ‘John Bouchier, a canon regular of the Augustinian monastery of St. Bartholomew the Great in Smithfield, London’. Thus, after taking the oath of fealty in the presence of the Chancellor, Sir Thomas Audley, John Bouchier took office as Abbot of Leicester.

His predecessor had not yet ceased corresponding with Thomas Cromwell. On 10th February 1534 Richard Pexall wrote recommending a favourite canon, Thomas Dethick, for the vacant priority of Thurgarton, Nottinghamshire, adding ‘I had intended to have resigned my office to him as the ablest man in my house’.²⁶ He was successful; Dethick became Prior of Thurgarton and the new abbot was probably glad to see a potentially resentful canon depart. Next Pexall turned to a personal grievance. On his resignation he had been granted the generous (and, one cannot help feeling, ill-deserved) pension of £100 per annum; he was required to pay tax on this sum, and the grasping old man thought the demand should be met by the abbey, and not by himself personally. He complained to Cromwell (19th April 1534) that the bishop had:

‘taxed my pension £13 in payment of the King’s subsidy and because it is taxed by itself and not by the house my successor refuses to pay it. If you will write to him on my behalf I doubt not he will exonerate me.’²⁷

No letter from Cromwell survives on this subject, but it is evident that he did take up the matter, as it is mentioned (with lengthy comments) in one of Bouchier’s subsequent letters. This is the last we hear of Abbot Richard Pexall; the date of his death is not recorded, but it must have been before the abbey was surrendered in 1538.

The letters of Abbot Bouchier to Thomas Cromwell are fawning, obsequious and sometimes whining in tone, full of flattery and protestations of loyal devotion to the powerful minister. The first letter, dated 8th March 1534, indicates the price of his preferment, the sum of £100 and the lease of Ingarsby to the statesman’s nephew Richard

(great-grandfather of Oliver Cromwell, and, like his uncle, a keen collector of monastic spoils):—

‘I am ready, as I always have been, to do you service. Until I am better able to reward you I will always accomplish my promise concerning the hundred pounds and the farm of Yngwersby which you required of me for your nephew, Master Richard, with as much speed as a stranger in a strange country may I trust to find the convent tractable’.²⁸

The abbot’s trust was, however, to prove misplaced as far as the lease was concerned, and it was not until April 1536 that Cromwell received his money. The next letter bears no date, but from the references to Ingarsby and to Pexall’s grumbles it must have been written soon afterwards:—

‘According to my promise I have laboured with my brethren for their goodwill to seal the farm of Yngwordsbye for Master Richard, but they wilfully refuse, and therefore I have taken from them all their keys to the common seal, so that if it be your pleasure I shall seal it and send it up to you without their consent, trusting you will bear me harmless against their complaints, for I will never depart from any promise during my life. Whereas you marvel that against equity and conscience I compel my predecessor to pay his portion to the King’s collection, I had nothing to do with it, for it is not in me to make him pay it, but it belongs to the bishop. The bishop may ease him if he will, but I cannot, except you wish me to pay it for him, which I am not able to do. The house is in debt £1,000, which I must pay, and £100 to the King during the next four years for my restitution, £100 to my predecessor, and £42 to yearly collectors for the King. I must pay wages to 200 persons in my house, and find them meat and drink. What a great thing is this for me to do, and pay my predecessor’s debts also! He is but one man, and keeps one man and one boy, and is out of debt. I find him woods and coals and all implements to his house, horses and all their appurtenances. I have loved and cherished him as never did man in Leicester. I never had good dish but he had part of it. I never had thing to his pleasure but I gave it him. Every day I went to his lodging; that thing that I could devise to his comfort I always did; and yet unnaturally, and that privily, I making much of him according to my old usage, he hath complained to your Mastership of me, for that which lieth not in me to help. I sealed his indenture three days after my installation. I beg you to consider my intolerable charges.

John Abbot of Leicester’.²⁹

If all Bouchier says about Pexall is true he certainly had grounds for complaining of his ingratitude; but there was probably some exaggeration in this letter of lamentations. Despite his threat he did not dare to seal the lease of Ingarsby without his canons’ agreement, which would have been strictly illegal; though he continued to try to cajole them into parting with this valuable pasture land.

On 11th August 1534 the Abbey of St. Mary de Pratis accepted the Royal Supremacy of the Church, the document of subscription being signed by ‘Joannes Bouchier alias Bouscer, abbas’, Richard Thurmeston, prior, Robert Sapcote, sub-prior, and 23 others.³⁰ ‘Thurmeston’ was presumably an *alias* for Richard Bromley, whose signature as prior appears on documents both before and after this date. Bouchier must have realised, if he had not done so since the beginning, that his rule at Leicester would not be long. Towards the end of 1535 a Royal commissioner, Dr Richard Layton, making a tour of the Midlands, stayed at Leicester Abbey. From there on 22nd December he sent Cromwell a report on his visitations; on St. Mary de Pratis he commented:

‘The abbey here is confederate, we suppose, and will confess nothing. The abbot is

an honest man, but he hath here the most obstinate and factious canons that ever I knew.³¹

Layton went on to complain that Bishop Longland of Lincoln, Pexall's old adversary, had held a visitation at Leicester in Lent 1535, before it was due, thus anticipating the commissioner's own visitation. No record of this episcopal visitation, unfortunately, seems to have survived.

The canons certainly proved obstinate as regards the lease of Ingarsby; when on 19th April 1536 Bouchier wrote to Cromwell sending him the promised money he could only lament their refusal and explain how necessary the pasture was to the abbey for its cattle and sheep — "beeves and muttons". The abbot makes his excuses in a cringing tone:

'My singular good Master: my duty remembered, I trust in God that you be in good health; for the which I more than all other do be most bounden to pray for. Please it your good Mastership to understand that, according to my due promise, I have sent by my servant, the bearer hereof, the hundred pounds which I promised to you for your great and manifold pains taken in my favour; and that I send it with as good will as ever I sent anything in my life; humbly beseeching your infinite goodness to continue continually your former favour; the which, God being my record, I prefer above all my living. Whereas your Mastership did require me for the farm of Yngwordsby in Master Richards favour, I have as vehemently moved my brethren therefore, as I would have done for a right high matter; but because it ever was the demesne lands of the house, and that without the same farm we can bring up neither beeves nor muttons for the maintenance of our hospitalities, I cannot bend them to it; for my predecessor did bring our poor monastery to the hindrance that it is in by letting that farm. Therefore since your pleasure is that I shall prosper, because I am of your Mastership's advancement especially, I with kneeling heart beseech your goodness not to require it; partly, because my brethren in no wise will grant or agree to it; especially, because the lack of that farm is the extreme undoing of our house. Thus, your good Mastership, extending your old goodness to me your bedesman, I and all my brethren shall be bounden to pray for your prosperous health; for we have no demesne lands but that. Christ Jesus have your honour in his blessed tuition! Amen.

The XIX day of April

By your assured bedesman, in and at all times,
John Abbot of Leicester³².

Some of the phrases in this letter would have been more suitably addressed to the Almighty than to the Master of the Rolls, the position held by Cromwell at the time, which accounts for Bouchier's use of the term 'your Mastership'. The abbot may have been feeling insecure. Soon afterwards (4th July 1536) the unco-operative canons rallied round their superior; Prior Richard Bromley and nineteen others signed a letter to the Earl of Huntingdon, who was honorary Steward of the abbey (a position of honour, not to be confused with that of the steward who was an employee of the house), in his favour:

'We beg you to have pity on our good and religious father abbot, otherwise we are likely to lose a virtuous pastor. We should never be so loth to miss him, but are afraid that sinistral reports have been made of him to the King. We beg you therefore to intercede for us'.³³

Nothing is known, however, of any 'sinistral reports' against Abbot Bouchier.

During his four years as abbot Bouchier seems to have been a competent administrator. The monastic income was improved; the abbey's debts were reduced from £1,000, as left by Pexall, to just over £400.³⁴ Bouchier appears to have paid more visits to the outlying

estates than many monastic heads, instead of leaving this duty to his steward.³⁵ These facts must be set against the unpleasant reaction caused by his letters to Cromwell. The last recorded letter he wrote as abbot, dated 6th May 1538, has a particularly nauseating note:

‘I have sent you a brace off at oxen and a score of fat wethers, not as a sufficient present, but for a declaration of my affection. O that God would reveal the secrets of my heart, that you might see my wish to do you good service!’³⁶

On 28th August, 1538, the Abbot of Leicester did perform the service required of him. With Richard Duckett, the prior, Richard Webbe, the sub-prior, and seventeen other canons, he signed the document surrendering Leicester Abbey and all its possessions into the King’s hands.³⁷ On the same day, signing himself ‘John Bourchier, priest’, he dashed off another letter to Cromwell (now Lord Privy Seal), quite in his usual vein:

‘I and my brethren have surrendered our house into the King’s hands, and thanks to his Highness and your Lordship, we be well entreated. Dr. Cave and Mr. Freeman have given me the King’s reward, £20, to serve me till Lady Day in Lent next. It will cost me £8 or £9 in competent apparel, and then I have little left to serve me and 2 or 3 servants. I desire you to write to Dr. Cave that I may have as much more as you shall please; for so poor a man never made surrender. I beg you to grant me this in my need.’³⁸

Next day Dr Francis Cave, one of the two commissioners receiving the surrender, sent his report to Cromwell, writing ‘We have discharged the abbot and convent with £149 as appears by the book we send. The abbot having £20 desires of your Lordship that he may have £20 more.’³⁹ Francis Cave belonged to a family of local gentry; in March 1539 he obtained a grant of the abbey buildings from the Crown, and about the same time his brother Brian Cave purchased the desirable manor of Ingarsby;⁴⁰ Cromwell and his nephew must have lost interest in that property, perhaps because the Lord Privy Seal had decided to take for himself Launde Priory and its lands, not far away.

‘So poor a man never made surrender’ wailed the ex-abbot. This was probably an exaggeration, but in any case this state of affairs was remedied a year later. In the list of pensions for Leicester Abbey, issued by the Court of Augmentations 4th November 1539, Bourchier received the very large sum of £200 per annum, to be paid in equal portions at Lady Day and Michaelmas; the former prior, Richard Duckett, was granted an annuity of £10, most of the canons £5 or £6.⁴¹ The Faculty Office Registers record the grant of dispensations to ‘John Burcher, recently abbot of Leicester’ and his brethren (listed by name) to hold benefices with change of habit, i.e. to lead the lives of secular priests.⁴²

Why did John Bourchier receive that enormous pension? It is difficult to assess the value of money in Tudor times in present-day terms, but his canons’ relatively small pensions were sums upon which they could live quite adequately. Large as it was, however, Bourchier’s pension was equalled and even exceeded by those awarded to some other abbots. His former superior, Robert Fuller, became a very wealthy man: in October 1539 he yielded up St. Bartholomew’s Priory and was granted most of the priory’s property for life, and when he surrendered Waltham Abbey also in March 1540 he received an additional pension of £200, though as he died later that year he did not enjoy it for long. The abbot of Cirencester, which with Waltham and Leicester was one of the three richest Augustinian houses, similarly received £200 per annum, as did the abbot of Abingdon, who also had one of his abbey’s manors as a residence; the abbot of Evesham was granted an annuity of £240, besides the abbey almonry for the same purpose. The abbots of St. Albans and Tewkesbury each had a pension of £266.13s.4d (400 marks), granted until they should receive a benefice of the same or greater value; Abbot Wakeman of Tewkesbury had his pension cancelled by appointment to the new bishopric of Gloucester (the see to which

Bourchier was to be nominated in after years) eighteen months later. Such an arrangement was one reason why a number of former abbots and priors were appointed to bishoprics and deaneries over the next few years; their pensions were thus cancelled, representing a considerable saving to the Crown. The abbot of Bermondsey received the colossal annuity of £333.6s.8d (500 marks) despite the fact that he was already Bishop of St. Asaph. The heads of the three other Leicestershire abbeys, much smaller houses, had pensions of very different amounts: the abbot of Croxton Kerrial receiving £80, the abbot of Garendon £30, and the abbot of Owston £18. The priors of Launde and Ulverscroft received annuities of £60 and £20 respectively.⁴³

Several of these fortunate abbots had one thing in common: they had obtained their abbacies in recent years through the favour of Thomas Cromwell. This was certainly the case with the abbots of Evesham, St. Albans and Tewkesbury, and with Robert Fuller when he became prior of St. Bartholomew's *in commendam*. There is evidence that Philip Hawford, Abbot of Evesham, Fuller, and Bourchier himself secured preferment by bribes to Cromwell. Two years before he became abbot, Hawford had written to him alluding to 'the promises ... which shall always be ready when you call me to preferment';⁴⁴ when the old abbot of Evesham was persuaded to resign and Hawford succeeded, one of Cromwell's satellites wrote 'touching Master Cromwell's matter the abbot says it shall be paid tomorrow morning'⁴⁵ and, sure enough, in Cromwell's accounts there appears soon afterwards the sum of £266.13s.4d. (400 marks) paid by Abbot Hawford.⁴⁶ Moreover, Hawford and the abbot of St. Albans had both been appointed only months before the surrender of their houses, and in both cases their predecessors, like Richard Pexall at Leicester, had been coerced into unwilling resignation. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that these huge pensions — which, it should be noted, were strictly honoured, even though some fell into arrears in the time of King Edward VI — were rewards for services rendered by prior agreement.

Like most of the former monks, canons and friars, the canons of Leicester were eager to take advantage of their dispensations to hold benefices; within a few years several of them were incumbents or curates of parishes in Leicestershire, still receiving their pensions as well. Their head, however, was at first marked out for higher and speedier promotion.

The Bishoprics Act, 1539, authorised the King to establish new bishoprics by letters patent; it did not specify any actual sees but two lists of proposed dioceses exist. One names twelve new bishoprics with the areas of their jurisdiction: they included Leicester (but the cathedral was to be the collegiate church of St. Mary in the Newarke, not the abbey) and Shrewsbury, where there had been a suffragan bishop since 1537 and where the abbey church would be the cathedral. The second list gives details of the endowments; nearly all the bishops of the new sees were to receive £333.6s.8d (500 marks) per annum. In the left margin of this document, in the King's own writing, are the names of proposed bishops: against the entry for Shrewsbury Henry has written 'John Bourchier of Leycester, quondam abbas' (sometime abbot).⁴⁷ Despite the spoils of the monasteries, however, the Treasury needed money for other purposes. Only six of the suggested bishoprics in fact materialised; Shrewsbury, like Leicester, was not amongst them, and the bishop-designate remained 'quondam abbas'.

Pension records indicate that John Bourchier lived in or near Leicester — within the Archdeaconry — during the next few years, but until he became Rector of Church Langton in 1554 his exact whereabouts are unknown. Nichols thinks he resided for a time at St John's Chapel, Leicester. The historian bases this assumption on slender grounds, from a reference in John Leland's description of Leicester in his *Itinerary*: 'By Bishop's Water is a chapel belonging to the hospital of St. John. At this chapel lyeth Mr. Boucher.'⁴⁸ Nichols

comments:

'As Leland was in Leicester in 1538 or 1539 the "Mr Boucher" here mentioned may possibly be the abbot of Leicester, who was about that time ejected from his abbey. The expression 'lyeth' I take to mean 'liveth' as it is not likely than anyone should have been buried in this little chapel.'⁴⁹

There is nothing to confirm this theory, and Leland generally uses the word 'lyeth' when he means 'buried', and 'dwelleth' when referring to a place of residence. The chapel of St. John the Baptist was situated in Belgrave Gate, near to Bishop's Water, the smaller arm of the River Soar. It belonged to St. John's Hospital in Highcross Street; later it became Crown property, and in 1589 Queen Elizabeth granted it to the borough of Leicester. Records of 1603/4 indicate that it was then let as a dwelling-house.⁵⁰ The former abbot's residence there, however, must be regarded as not proven. It may be significant that in the first year of Queen Mary's reign a pardon was granted, 3rd May 1554, to 'John Boucher late of London alias (otherwise) of Leicester Co. Leic.',⁵¹ with no other details. This was possibly the ex-abbot; pardons were sometimes issued almost automatically, as a technical formality, in those times of transition.

Henry VIII died in 1547 and was succeeded by the boy king Edward VI. By 1552 the national finances had fallen into an appalling state; government payments were suspended, including pensions of over £10 per annum, which consequently fell into arrears. In November 1552 five commissioners were named to draw up a list of ecclesiastical pensioners in Leicestershire. One of the five was named as 'John Burchier, clerk' and it seems probable that this was the ex-abbot. The four others belonged to local families; one was Thomas Cave, perhaps a relative of Francis Cave who had received the surrender of Leicester Abbey. The first entry on the list reads:

'Leicester Monastery. In primis John Burchier late abbote there ys alvye and unpaied for one halfe yere ended Myghelmas last past'

and later adds 'he hath not sold his pension of £200.'⁵² The Council's suspension of payments was probably not so burdensome to the former abbot, who had received a large amount since the surrender, as to people like the unfortunate Prior Duckett, who was still alive and whose annuity of £10 was also in arrears. The five commissioners all signed the completed list, the fourth signature being 'John Bourcher, clerke'.

Less than two years later, and sixteen years after the dissolution, the former abbot became a parish priest, during the Catholic reaction of Queen Mary's reign. The Lincoln diocesan records note the institution, on 4th June 1554, of:

'John Bourcher, bachelor of Holy Writ, presented by Edward Griffin, esquire, to the church of Church Langton, vacant by the deprivation of the last rector of the same.'⁵³

Edward Griffin of Dingley Hall, a zealous Catholic, patron of the benefice, was the Attorney General; the deprived rector was the Protestant Lawrence Sanders, who was to be burnt for heresy at Coventry next year. Church Langton was one of the richest livings in Leicestershire, being worth £60 per annum.

In the meantime the Government had ordered a report to be made on the surviving members of religious orders, presumably to check the pension situation. Richard Barker, an official of the diocese of Lincoln (later, in 1560, to become Archdeacon of Leicester) conducted an enquiry at Lincoln in the church of St Peter Eastgate. Bouchier appeared before him on 10th June 1554, six days after his institution to Church Langton. The first entry on the list for the archdeaconry of Leicester, translated from Latin, reads:

'Master John Bowecher of Church Langton where he resides appeared in person on the tenth day of June in the year 1554 and certified that his rectory is of the annual value of £60. And that formerly he was abbot of the dissolved monastery of the blessed

Mary in the town of Leicester, and exhibited letters patent of King Henry VIII under the seal of the Court of Augmentations dated the 4th November in the 30th year of his reign by which he was allowed an annual pension of £200 payable on the feasts of the Annunciation of the blessed Virgin Mary and Saint Michael the Archangel in equal portions every year. He has never married nor has he any other annual income, as he says.⁵⁴

We know, then, that John Bouchier took up residence at his rectory immediately after his institution, and that he had kept his vow of celibacy. He certainly had no need of any other income; apart from that from his wealthy benefice, his pension was in 1554 the highest paid to a resident in the diocese of Lincoln.⁵⁵

After four years as a country parson Bouchier again came close to obtaining a bishopric — nineteen years after his nomination to Shrewsbury. Letters patent of Philip and Mary, dated 25th October 1558, grant:

‘custody of the temporalities of the bishopric of Gloucester, void by the death of James Brookes, the last bishop, to John Bowrsher, S.T.B. (Bachelor of Sacred Theology), from Lady Day last until the said temporalities shall be restored to him, now bishop nominate (episcopus nominatus).’⁵⁶

In other words, Bouchier was to have the income from the bishopric in readiness for the formalities that would precede his actually becoming the fourth Bishop of Gloucester. His nomination was probably due both to Queen Mary’s regard for a former abbot and to the prospective cancelling of his pension by giving him the larger income provided by the bishopric, and the consequent saving for the Treasury; his name may have been suggested by the Attorney-General Edward Griffin, patron of Church Langton. But again Bouchier was to be frustrated in his hopes. Mary died less than a month later (17th November 1558) and his appointment to Gloucester was set aside by being simply ignored. There had been a high mortality rate amongst the bishops; Gloucester was one of five sees vacant at the time of the Queen’s death to which bishops had been nominated but not yet consecrated. Bouchier was at least fortunate in that he seems to have remained at liberty, two of the other bishops-designate being imprisoned soon afterwards; other arrangements were speedily made for the care of the diocese of Gloucester, though no new bishop was appointed until 1562. He had not, of course, had time to make any mark there; neither the Cathedral Library nor the Gloucestershire County Archives contain any reference to him.

Nichols writes: ‘On the death of Queen Mary, her intended favour of making him a bishop becoming of no avail, he left England’,⁵⁷ as if the ex-abbot had fled abroad immediately afterwards. In fact he remained in this country for several years. During the early years of Elizabeth’s reign Bouchier remained rector of Church Langton but seems to have been non-resident; perhaps he felt it wise to lie low, whilst the Catholic bishops whose number he had expected to join were being deprived and imprisoned. A list of clergy in the archdeaconry, 1561/2, notes the rector of Church Langton as ‘Mr bowser’,⁵⁸ but no Christian name is given as is usual, though a space is left for it. Is it possible that nobody, not even his curate, Edmund Tylly, knew it? It was probably from this list that Nichols obtained the former abbot’s name which he enters amongst the rectors of the parish as ‘John Bower, 1562’,⁵⁹ with no other details. This is repeated in *The History of the Parish of Langton* by J.H. Hill, who adds, incorrectly, that he was succeeded as rector by Dr. Osborne in 1595.⁶⁰

A list of pensioners in the diocese of Lincoln approved by Bishop Bullingham 20th January 1569/70, for submission to the Exchequer, contains the entry, ‘Leicester de Pratis: John Bucer former abbot, pensioner, not known whether he lives or not’.⁶¹

Evidently, despite having lived through all the religious changes of the past thirty years,

Bourchier felt unable to accept the Elizabethan settlement, though he may have avoided making a decision for a long time. It was not until in or shortly before August 1570 that action was taken against him and he was deprived of his benefice.⁶² This was presumably for refusal to subscribe to the Acts of Supremacy and of Uniformity, though as the Lincoln episcopal court books for 1570 are no longer extant this cannot be certainly known. His successor, Thomas Roos (or Rose) was instituted 19th August 1570,

‘presented by Edward Griffin esquire to the parish of Langton in the diocese of Lincoln, vacant by the deprivation of John Bowserre the last rector of the same’,⁶³ even as Bourchier himself had been presented to the benefice when vacant by the deprivation of Lawrence Sanders. This Edward Griffin was the son of Bourchier’s old patron, the former Attorney-General, who had died in 1569.

Soon afterwards, probably in preparation for leaving the country, the old man took the practical step of selling his pension — which he had evidently not forfeited — for ready cash. In view of his age he seems to have made a good bargain; in fact on reviewing the former abbot’s career he appears to have been either remarkably fortunate or a shrewd businessman: gaining the abbacy of Leicester and afterwards a large pension by his dealings with Thomas Cromwell, improving the abbey’s finances, obtaining a valuable parish and just missing two bishoprics. Now he acquired a goodly sum to take with him into exile. In the Calendar of Patent Rolls of Queen Elizabeth appears the following grant, dated 7th June 1571:

‘Grant for life to Thomas Smyth of Theidon ad Montem, Co. Essex, knight, councillor, of an annuity of £200, payable at the Exchequer, in consideration of the surrender by Smyth of a patent of the Court of Augmentations, 4 Nov., 30 Hen. VIII, granting a pension of £200 yearly to John Boucher, late abbot of the monastery of Leicester, for life or until he should be promoted to a living of the same or greater value, which pension Smyth has purchased from Boucher for £900; and for his service.’⁶⁴

Sir Thomas Smith (1513-1577) of Theydon Mount, Essex, was a prominent statesman and a member of the Council. How Bourchier came into contact with him we cannot know; but with Smith’s nine hundred pounds he could easily afford to escape to the Continent and live his remaining days in comfort.

Sometime between August 1570 and the end of 1576 he quietly slipped across the sea, perhaps to France or Flanders. A wealthy and a very old man, he was probably quite content to await death in secure and comfortable obscurity.

The name of John Bourchier appears for the last time in an official record in a return to the Exchequer, 29th January 1577,⁶⁵ of ‘fugitives over the sea, contrary to statute.’ Names are listed by counties; there are three for Leicestershire:

Henry Jolliffe, clerk.

John Pott, schoolmaster.

John Bowcer, late abbat of Leicester.

This does not mean, of course, that there was any connection between the three exiles. No details have been found of a ‘Henry Jolliffe, clerk’ in Leicestershire. John Pott had been a master of the Grammar School and confrator of Wyggeston’s Hospital; in 1568 he had left the town because of suspicions against him of misappropriation of hospital funds and had retired to Oxford, where he had formerly been a fellow of Merton College, expelled for Catholic leanings in 1563. Pott was evidently still a Catholic at heart and in 1570 fled overseas to Louvain;⁶⁶ later he settled in Ireland, where he was still living in 1583.

After referring to the above document Nichols writes:

‘In August 1584 a general pardon to “John abbot late of Leicester” is noticed in a

grant in the British Museum, so that he seems to have been one of the last surviving abbots.’⁶⁷

The historian assumes that this pardon was granted to the former abbot of Leicester — but he is doubly in error. In the first place, the pardon dates from 1484, a century earlier. The Catalogue of the Harleian Manuscripts describes the actual book whose reference Nichols quotes as ‘... a Register of the grants, etc., passing the Privy Seal, Royal Signet, or sign manual during the reigns of K. Edward V and K. Richard III.’ The entry mentioned by Nichols reads ‘to John Abbot, late of Leycestre, a generale Pardonne.’⁶⁸ Note the comma! This indicates Nichols’ second misreading: the 1484 pardon did not refer to the then abbot of Leicester (whose name was, indeed, John Shepshed) but to an individual named John Abbot. In the Calendar of the Patent Rolls details of the actual pardon of 1484 can be found, to ‘John Abbot alias Albote alias Abbod of Leicester, chaplain, late of Chacombe, Co. Northampton, late of Braunescombe, Co. Worcester.’⁶⁹

It is disappointing that, after having traced the career of John Bouchier (alias Bowser and all the other variants of his surname) for so many years, it has not been possible to discover the date and place of his death. Inquiries have been made but it seems highly unlikely that this information can ever be obtained. No register of the Austin Canons for that time exists, even if the ex-abbot still regarded himself as a member of that Order. In *Athenae Cantabrigienses* it is stated ‘he probably died c.1581’⁷⁰ but without giving any authority or reason for this suggestion; in that year Bouchier would have reached the age of eighty-eight, an exceptionally advanced age for the Tudor period.

There is, in fact, the possibility that the old man might have already died when his name appeared in the Exchequer list of 1577. As mentioned earlier, one of the other persons listed for Leicestershire was ‘Henry Jolliffe, clerk’, but no such individual has been traced for this county. There was, however, a prominent recusant in exile named Henry Joliffe who came from Worcestershire, for which county the list has no entry at all. Can a mistake have occurred — has this unusual name been listed in the wrong county? This cleric had been a prebendary of Worcester and later Dean of Bristol and had attended the trials of Bishop Hooper and Archbishop Cranmer; in 1559 he had been deprived as a Catholic and had escaped abroad, settling at Louvain. But this Henry Joliffe had died in exile towards the end of 1573, as the Prerogative Court of Canterbury granted administration of his property 28th January 1574. If, then, he is the man named in the list drawn up three years after his death (although the fact of his death was known in this country), it is possible that other persons named in it, such as the aged Bouchier, might have also have died in the meantime.

Nichols was correct in writing of John Bouchier ‘he seems to have been one of the last surviving abbots’; some forty years had gone by since the surrender of Leicester Abbey. What remains to recall him today? Nothing except a few records (Nichols gives in one of his illustrations a facsimile of Bouchier’s signature on the deed of surrender),⁷¹ the best known of which are those lamentable letters to Thomas Cromwell, and some of the buildings he knew: Eton and the Cambridge colleges, the Norman arches of St. Bartholomew’s Priory (with Prior Bolton’s oriel window, new in Bouchier’s day), Abbot Penny’s brick wall at Leicester Abbey, and St. Peter’s church at Church Langton; it is quite likely that he never visited Shrewsbury or Gloucester, where he might have been enthroned as bishop. This, it seems, is the last that can be said of John Bouchier, Augustinian canon of St. Bartholomew’s, Smithfield, Abbot of Leicester, Bishop-designate of Shrewsbury and later of Gloucester, and Rector of Church Langton.

Notes

This paper is an extension of a much shorter article by the same writer which appeared in the *Leicester Cathedral Quarterly* in 1977.

- 1 A. Hamilton Thompson, *The Abbey of St. Mary of the Meadows, Leicester* (1949), pp.85-89
- 2 J. Nichols, *The History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester* (1795-1815) vol. I part II p.275
- 3 *The Victoria History of the County of Leicester*, vol. II (1954), pp.16-17 (V.C.H.)
- 4 *Ibid.*, vol. II (1954), p.55; vol. V (1964), p.200
- 5 *Leicester Cathedral Quarterly*, vol. 11 no.1 (1977), pp.11-17
- 6 Sir W. Sterry, *The Eton College Register, 1441-1698* (1943), p.43
- 7 J.& J.A. Venn, *Alumni Cantabrigienses* (1922), part I vol. I, p.187
- 8 C.H.& T. Cooper, *Athenae Cantabrigienses* (1858-1913), vol. I, p.449
- 9 T. Baker, *History of the College of St. John the Evangelist, Cambridge* (ed. J.E.B. Mayor, 1869), vol. I, p.245; Vol. II, p.663
- 10 E.A. Webb, *The Records of St. Bartholomew's Priory and the church and parish of St. Bartholomew the Great* (1921), vol. I, pp.238-40
- 11 *Letters and Papers, Henry VIII*, (ed. J. Gairder and R.H. Brodie) vol. V, p.475. (no.1044)
- 12 E.A. Webb, *op. cit.*, p.245
- 13 *L.& P. Hen. VIII*, vol. VI, pp.200-1 (no.447)
- 14 *Ibid.*, vol. VI, p.604 (no.1495)
- 15 J. Le Neve, *Fasti Ecclesiae Anglicanae, 1541-1857* (1974 ed), vol. III, p.65
- 16 *Lincoln Record Society*, vol. 35 (1944), p.186; P. Lloyd & T.Y. Cocks, *Fifty Years, Thirteen Centuries* (1976), p.19
- 17 *Lincoln Record Society*, vol. 35 (1944), pp.201-2
- 18 *L.& P. Hen. VIII*, vol. V, p.518 (no.1175)
- 19 *Ibid.*, vol. V, p.513 (no.1158)
- 20 *Ibid.*, vol. V, p.604 (no.1426)
- 21 *Ibid.*, vol. VII, p.9 (n.18)
- 22 *Ibid.*, vol. VII, p.55 (n.147/10)
- 23 A.H. Thompson, *op. cit.*, p.85
- 24 *L.& P. Hen. VIII*, vol. VII (i), p.109 (no.262/9)
- 25 *Ibid.*, vol. VII (i), p.110 (no.262/28)
- 26 *Ibid.*, vol. VII (i), p.68 (no.169)
- 27 *Ibid.*, vol. VII (i), p.205 (no.513)
- 28 *Ibid.*, vol. VII (i), p.130 (no.301)
- 29 *Ibid.*, vol. VII (i), p.228-9 (no.579)
- 30 *Ibid.*, vol. VII (i), p.440 (no.1121)
- 31 *Ibid.*, vol. IX, p.341 (no.1005)
- 32 *Ibid.*, vol. X, p.285 (no.690); Nichols, *op. cit.*, vol. I, part I, p.CXLII
- 33 *Ibid.*, vol. XI, p.15 (no.26)
- 34 *V.C.H.*, *op. cit.*, vol. II (1954), p.17
- 35 *Trans. Leics. Hist. and Arch. Soc.*, XLI (1965-6), p.18
- 36 *L.& P. Hen. VIII*, vol. XIII (i), p.346 (no.939)
- 37 *Ibid.*, vol. XIII (ii), p.80 (no.207)
- 38 *Ibid.*, vol. XIII (ii), p.80 (no.208)
- 39 *Ibid.*, vol. XIII (ii), p.81 (no.211)
- 40 *Ibid.*, vol. XIV (i), p.610; and Nichols, *op. cit.*, vol. III part I, p.292
- 41 *L.& P. Hen. VIII*, vol. XIV (i), p.598 (no.1355)
- 42 D.S. Chambers, *Faculty Office Registers* (1966), p.150 (Register Vv f.218^r)
- 43 *V.C.H.*, *op. cit.*, vol. II (1954), pp. 30, 6, 22, 12, 10
- 44 *L.& P. Hen. VIII*, vol. X, p.390 (no.930)
- 45 *Ibid.*, vol. XIII (i), p.354 (no.974)
- 46 *Ibid.*, vol. XIV (ii), p.322 (no.782)

- 47 *Ibid.*, vol. XIV (ii), p.151-2 (no.429); J. Strype, *Ecclesiastical Memorials* (1822 ed.), vol. I, part 1, pp.406-7
- 48 J. Leland, *Itinerary*, (ed. L. Toulmin Smith, 1964), vol. I, p.17
- 49 Nichols, *op. cit.*, vol. I, part II, p.325 note
- 50 *V.C.H.*, *op. cit.*, vol. IV (1958), p.359
- 51 *Calendar of the Patent Rolls*, 1 Philip & Mary, p.463
- 52 *Lincoln Record Society*, vol. 53 (1959), p.30
- 53 Lincolnshire Archives Office, Diocesan Records, Register 28, fo. 125v
- 54 *Lincoln Record Society*, vol. 53, *op. cit.*, p.82
- 55 *Ibid.*, p.XVIII
- 56 *Cal. Pat. Rolls*, 5 & 6 Philip & Mary, p.390
- 57 Nichols, *op. cit.*, vol. I, part II, p.275
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- 59 Nichols, *op. cit.*, vol. II part II, p.666
- 60 J.H. Hill, *The History of the Parish of Langton* (1867), p.61
- 61 *Lincoln Record Society*, vol. 53, *op. cit.*, p.137
- 62 *V.C.H.*, *op. cit.*, vol II (1954), p.55, and vol. IV (1964), p.200
- 63 Lincolnshire Archives Office, Diocesan Records, Register 28, fo. 51v
- 64 *Cal. Pat. Rolls*, 13 Elizabeth, p.207
- 65 *J. Strype, Annals of the Reformation* (1824 ed.), vol. II part 2, p.597; F. Peck, *Desiderata Curiosa*, vol. I, book II, p.78
- 66 P. Lloyd & T.Y. Cocks, *op. cit.*, p.31
- 67 Nichols, *op. cit.*, vol. I, part II, p.275
- 68 Harl. MSS. 433 p.76 (no.934)
- 69 *Cal. Pat. Rolls*, Edward IV, Edward V & Richard III, p.483
- 70 C.H.& T. Cooper, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p.450
- 71 Nichols, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, part II, plate XVII, fig. 3