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Aust and Wiclif

by J. Baker
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AUST AND WICLIF.

By JAMES BAKER, F.R. Hist.S.

THE tiny and scattered village of Aust is a spot singularly full of interest to the geologist, naturalist, and historian; and it is a spot in which the archæologist can well linger, although man has not so well preserved the monuments of his history as Nature has preserved her history's story in the stratified cliffs and famous bone bed.

But, standing close to those cliffs on the solid remnants of the Old Passage Pier, now torn and broken in great fragments by the swift rush of the Severn tide, one can look across to the Welsh hills and picture scenes in Britain's history from Roman and pre-Roman days. The learned prelate Dr. Forrest Browne and Mr. C. S. Taylor have dwelt fully upon one of these scenes: that, whether it happened exactly at Aust, or further inland, at least gives us a picture of those early days; but if Aust has long held claim to being the spot in England where Rome attempted to sway and become the overlord of the British Church, so also is it the spot claiming to have had in its midst the first English teacher who, after centuries of Rome's overlordship, had the temerity to teach the English folk there was a higher authority than Rome.

But we seem to have met to-day to prove a series of negatives. Dr. Forrest Browne has proved that Aust was not the place where St. Augustine met the British bishops, and I am afraid I must prove that the cherished tradition that Wiclif preached in Aust Church and sat in a chair still preserved in that church is hardly tenable. The church itself—that will, nevertheless, ever be linked with Wiclif's name—is an interesting one; of Perpendicular architecture without aisles, consisting of a long narrow nave lit by deeply moulded Perpendicular windows; a chancel, the floor of

which has been raised, with a good east window with modern glass put in by Mr. Richard Cann. A square-headed piscina in the south wall, only about eighteen inches from the pavement, and the lowness of the priest's door in the south wall, prove the raising of the chancel floor. The fine oak roof, supported by stone corbels with figures and angels, was discovered under a plaster roof, and has been restored, much of the old timbers and some of the stone corbels being preserved. A monument in the north wall of the chancel to Sir Samuel Astrey, Knighth, 1704, tells of the sway of his family, that locally are said to have given their name to the place; but as the Rev. Mr. Turner, the present curate-in-charge, states, Aust was known long before the Astreys.

In the chancel is preserved the old oak chair that is said to have been Wiclif's chair; but, alas! Wiclif died in 1384, and the ornamentation of this chair is classical, with volute and scrolls, and arches and a rose, proving distinctly that either there was an early Jacobean artist in wood living in the fourteenth century, or that Wiclif never sat in this chair. On the modern bench-ends a J. W. has been carved to commemorate Wiclif's connection with this church, for he had a connection with it though a shadowy one.

From the exterior the church is a handsome building, and the yew-tree walk leading up to it is picturesque. The tower is especially good, embattled and pinnacled with richly moulded windows, and with pretty little circular windows with flamboyant mouldings inserted in the octagonal tourelle on the south side. The grotesque gargoyles on the tower are quaint.

The font has a quatre feuille moulding, and rests on a central round pillar, with eight slight ornamented pillars round it. It is curious how all writers on the village have avoided stating the date of the building of the church. Atkins, Rudder, Bigland, down to the guide books of our own day, all are one in agreeing most indefinitely that the church is old or ancient. *Bristol and its Environs* says "Aust has an ancient church." Neither our own *Transactions* nor

the *Archæological Journal* nor the British Archæological Association's *Transactions* give the date, and on my two visits there I was unable to find the date from local inhabitants; but on writing to the Rev. A. Turner, the curate of Aust, he most kindly sent me a most lengthy reply, in which he deprecates the loose talk about the church, and the name being said to be derived from the Astreys. He agrees with me as to the evidence of the chancel floor being raised, but he cannot give me the date of the building of the church.

Canon Way writes of Aust Church that: "It is a chapelry of Henbury, and in a document dated 1462 the Vicar of Henbury is desired by the Bishop of Worcester to keep a chaplain there. We have never been able to tell to whom it is dedicated or any history of its building. The chancel is probably modern. The font is very interesting; in 1866, when the centuries of plaster, paint, and dirt were picked out, its present beautiful proportion and work came to light. I have the registers here from 1533."

In fact, the church is a most interesting problem, and a careful study of tower, buttresses, doors and windows should be made to at least approximate its date of building more exactly. The existing registers only go back to 1538 or 1533, but in *Domesday* it is stated that "Turstin, the son of Rolf, held five hides in Austreclive, a part of the manor of Huesberie, in the reign of King William."¹ But I have not to deal with Aust in those middle ages, between St. Austin's days and the later days of Wiclif; but to sketch how Wiclif's name became linked with Aust, and why it appears fairly certain he never was there.

In 1363 John Wiclif was Rector of Fylingham, in 1368 he exchanged this for Ludgershall in Buckinghamshire, and again he exchanged this benefice for that of Lutterworth in 1374; and during the whole of this time he was an irregular resident at Oxford, renting rooms in Queen's in the years 1363 to 1365, 1374 and 1375, and 1380. And we know how

¹ That a church existed at Aust about 1100 seems clear from what is stated on page 163 of this volume; but there is nothing now at Aust of so early a date.—ED.

hotly he was defended by the University of Oxford against Rome's attempt to secure his person.

Shortly after his presentation to Lutterworth he obtained from the Pope a grant of a prebend at Aust. I quote here from Lechler: "A place romantically situated on the south (*sic*) bank of the Severn, and connected with the endowed Church of Westbury, near Bristol. It was not a parish church, but a chapel. The prebend was evidently regarded as a sinecure, a place of honour, the holder being at liberty to appoint a substitute to read the masses required by the foundation. Wiclif seems, however, to have resigned the prebend immediately after obtaining it." Sergeant in his life of Wiclif says "he declined this prebend," but apparently only making this statement, on the fact that another was appointed to it; for in November of the same year (1375), as appears from an entry in the Rolls of Chancery, the prebend was bestowed on a certain Robert of Farrington. Wiclif had also resigned the charge at Ludgershall in 1376, for a William Newbold is mentioned in that year as holding it. So John Wiclif was no pluralist, although such a person as William of Wykeham held twelve livings—in addition to being the King's secretary, which prevented his seeing either of his twelve benefices. And yet Wiclif was granted a special license from the Pope to be a pluralist, for in January, 1373, he is spoken of as a canon, not yet a prebendary, of Lincoln, and is licensed by the Pope to keep the Westbury prebend, even after he should have obtained the prebend of Lincoln. No record of Wiclif's institution to the Aust prebend can be found in the diocesan registers at Worcester.

This special patronage of Wiclif by the Pope, Gregory XI., is interesting, for in the year 1374 he was one of the Commoners sent to treat with the Papal representatives at Bruges; but, like Luther, the more closely Wiclif knew Rome, the more sturdily he combated its influence; for two years after, in 1376, we read in the quaint language of *Capgrave's Chronicles*:—"In this tyme on John Wiclef, Maystir of Oxenforth, held many strange opiniones:—That

the Church of Rome is not hed of alle Cherchis. That Peter had no more auctorite thaune the othir aposteles: ne the Pope no more power than another priest. . . . And that no reules mad be Augustin, Benet, Fraunceys, adde no more perfeccion over the Gospel than doth lym whiting onto a coal; and that bischoppe's schuld have no prisoners; and many other things. Upon these matteres the Pope sent a bulle to the Archbishop of Canterbury and of London that they schuld areste the same Wiclef and make him to abjure these seide opiniones."

That Wiclif's work had penetrated the lives of common folk in Gloucestershire, we glean from a curious fact quoted in our own *Transactions*: but how fully the whole of England was influenced and excited in this Oxford movement may be best gleaned from the popular ballads of the days; ballads sung and recited at market and fair, as one sees and hears to-day historical and religious stories and ballads recited or sung in the streets and markets in Sicily and Spain. One of the quaintest of these poems is that of "Jacke Upland's" invective against the friars, printed in *Capgrave's Chronicles*. Let me quote two verses to prove what the English folk thought in and about Aust in the 14th century:—

"Why buy ye so precious clothes,
sith no man seeketh such
but for vaine glorie:
As Saint Gregorie sayth:
What betokeneth your great hood,
your scaplerie,
Your knotted girdle
And your wide cope?"

Why make ye men believe,
that your golden trentall sung of you,
to take therefor ten shillings,
or at least five shillings,
will bring souls out of hell
or out of purgatorie.
If this be soothe, certes,
Yee might bring all soules out of paine
And that wol ye nought
And then ye be out of charitie."

And to these outspoken words came as outspoken from their opponents, for in the Friar Daw Topias's answer to "Jack" is the following designation of Wiclif:—

"The thridde angel sent down
A sterre from heven;
bremli brennynge as a bround:
wermode it was callid,
wermode Jack most verreli
was Wiclif your maister."

These two quotations give a vivid picture of the controversies of the period immediately after the date when Wiclif's name was linked with Aust. There are many interesting notes on Aust in our own *Transactions*, notably in vol. xviii., the Rev. C. S. Taylor's references to it in a paper on the "Domesday hide of Gloucester"; but perhaps I may be allowed to doubt the fact stated by the late Mr. John Taylor in volume viii., that "the conversion of the popular mind towards their views was of slow process." In those days of but horse and foot travel, it encompassed England in a marvellously quick period, especially when one considers the penalty for thinking in those days shortly became burning. How Wiclif's work clung to Gloucestershire is exemplified in a quaint quotation from John Smyth's *Lives of the Berkeleys*, given in this same volume viii. of our *Transactions*.

Wiclif's personal presence here in Aust seems to be unproveable. But if it is difficult to prove the direct influence of Wiclif in the district immediately around our present meeting, it will not perhaps be out of place before concluding to remind our members that a corner of Gloucestershire visited in 1895 has the honour of having had transcribed there some of the treatises of Wiclif, that travelled from our Gloucestershire village far away into Bohemia, carried there by some of the Bohemians who thronged to Oxford when their Princess Anne was wife to our Richard the Second. In volume xix. of our *Transactions* may be seen a note upon this, stating that at the end of the second chapter of *De Ecclesia* is a note stating "Kemerton psano," and Professor Morfil, of Oxford, writes:—"Psano is the past participle passive of the

verb psati, to write It is quite correct Czech. There are many inscriptions in that language on the treatises of Wiclif, because they were copied by Bohemian scholars in England. You must remember that there were many Bohemian students at the University of Oxford; no doubt they came from the influence of Anne of Bohemia, wife of Richard the Second. There are many inscriptions I have translated for Mr. Poole. I suppose the inscription is *psano v K.*—*i.e.* written at Kemerton."

But what Czech scholar could have been staying in Gloucestershire in those days transcribing *De Ecclesia*? The Rev. Jerome Mercier, in his paper on "Kemerton," suggests it was the famous Nicholas Faulfisch, and he repeats the absurd Gasgoigne libel of one Peter Payne stealing the University seal. Mr. Mercier did not go to Bohemia for his facts, or I feel sure he would not have repeated that vilification that has lived 500 years, and that I have tried to slay. But that has nought to do with our subject to-day, and I only make this reference to it to show how Wiclif's influence was felt in Gloucestershire. This translation was made in 1407, and, in spite of Mr. John Taylor's assertion, we know Wiclif's teaching flamed swiftly throughout England.

In a review of the English Church in the 14th and 15th centuries, in volume xxii. of our *Transactions*, the Editor says:—"No reason is given for the power of the (Wiclif) movement in this district, and the origin and nature of the connection of Wiclif's influence with Bristol and Gloucestershire have yet to be worked out." I do not think we need look for any direct personal influence; all England was keenly alive, from peasant to baron, to this new soul freedom; but if we can discover, as the Vicar of Kemerton discovered, that intimate friends or disciples of Wiclif were working to spread their Master's teaching among the Gloucestershire folk, we shall have done good work in history. Perhaps even this slight paper may set some of our members at work on the subject in the parish registers or records.