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Thomas Bekynton

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THOMAS BEKYNTON.

BY THE RIGHT REV. THE LORD BISHOP OF GLOUCESTER, D.D.

A Presidential Address delivered at Wells on June 3rd, 1913.

THOSE of us who drove over from Bristol this morning, as we came down the road from the top of Mendip, caught our first glimpse, at a turn of the road, of a group of buildings, which, in the words of the late Professor Freeman, "has no rival either in our own island or beyond the seas." The buildings, with which you who are strangers to Wells hope to make a closer acquaintance within the next few days, have changed little in outward appearance since two Oxford students are said to have looked down on them some four hundred and fifty years ago from the same range of the Mendip Hills; and their conversation, as they gazed on them, has happily been preserved for us in a contemporary MS., an extract from which was first published by Wharton in the *Anglia Sacra*;¹ and a brief account of it may fitly serve as an introduction to what I have to say to you to-day. The conversation begins by one of the two undergraduates calling for a halt on the brow of the hill, and pleading to be allowed to lie down and rest awhile before descending to the village which he descries below. "*Village*, indeed," says his companion, who evidently knows the place well, "why, you ought to call it a *city*," and in justification of this he proceeds to describe in glowing terms the glory of the lovely cathedral church of St. Andrew, and the Bishop's Palace surrounded on all sides by streams of running water, and

¹ Vol. ii, p. 357. It is also printed in *Bekynton's Correspondence*, vol. ii, p. 321 (Rolls Series).

girdled with a delightful range of walls and towers. He goes on to dwell with enthusiasm on the learning and princely munificence of the bishop, who has added lustre to the city, provided the cathedral green with gateways and towers, and greatly improved the palace and surrounding buildings, so that he deserves to be called not indeed the founder, but the ornament and glory of the church. He then passes on to praise the affability of the courteous dean, the urbanity of the canons, renowned for their hospitality and kindness to strangers, in inviting whom to their houses they seem to vie with each other. Then the "inferior clergy" and the vicars choral come in for their share of praise, and we hear of the harmony and orderliness of the citizens, the excellence of the local government of the city, the cleanness of its streets (down which even then the streams of water were running), and the charming position of the city, which, we are told, is called Wells, so named by its original inhabitants from the wells which rise within it and flow forth from it.

Altogether it is a most pleasant picture that is given us of the place in which we have met together for our annual gathering, and of its inhabitants, and as the buildings remain unchanged, so we have only to introduce into the extract the names of the present bishop and dean, and of the holders of the various posts and offices mentioned, to make the description of the men also applicable to the present day, and to find in this ancient document a true account of Wells and its principal inhabitants in this year of grace 1913. But it is the bishop introduced into the picture whose acquaintance I am specially anxious for you to make to-day, as his name stands high in the list of the benefactors of Wells, and he was in many respects a typical mediæval prelate; and as you wander round the city you can scarcely fail to notice his quaint device, the canting rebus of the "beacon" on the top of a "ton," referring to his name of Bekynton, which is, for example, a conspicuous object on the great gateway leading from the market place into the

cathedral green, familiarly known as the "Penniless Porch." I propose, then, to give you a brief sketch of his career.

Thomas Bekynton, as his name indicates, was a native of the village of Beckington, some three miles from Frome, and thus was born (probably about 1390) within the limits of the diocese over which he was afterwards to preside. Educated at William of Wykeham's recent foundations of Winchester and New College, Oxford, of which he became a Fellow, and from whence he took his degree of Doctor of Laws, he entered in comparatively early days into the service of Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, whose Chancellor he became about 1420, and shortly afterwards we meet with him as holding various ecclesiastical preferments, as the living of Sutton Courtney in Berkshire, the Archdeaconry of Buckingham (1422), and a prebendal stall in York; and the estimation in which he was held is shown by his appointment as Dean of Arches in 1422, and Prolocutor of the Lower House of Convocation in 1433, 1434, and 1438. About this time he passed from the service of the Duke of Gloucester to that of his nephew, King Henry VI, as whose secretary he appears to have acted as early as 1437, although his formal appointment dates only from 1439. The position he had now attained is indicated by the importance of the embassies in which he was employed. Even in 1432 he had apparently taken part in the abortive efforts made to negotiate a treaty of peace with France. But more important was the embassy to Calais under Cardinal Beaufort in 1439, when a more serious effort was made to come to terms with the French. Of these negotiations we have a full account from the pen of Bekynton himself,¹ who acted as secretary, though, truth to say, we gather from a private letter of his which still remains² that he was thoroughly bored by the

¹ "Journal of the Proceedings of the Ambassadors who were sent to the Marches of Calais in June, 17 Henry VI, 1439, to treat for peace with France." *Proceedings of the Privy Council*, vol. v, p. 334. The authorship is certain, as "Ego Bekynton" occurs in several places.

² *Correspondence*, vol. i, p. 103.

proceedings, which ultimately proved unsuccessful, as the French insisted on harder terms than any which Beaufort was prepared to accept.

The next embassy on which Bekynton was employed was of a more romantic character. It was to negotiate a marriage for the king, who was now over twenty years of age. The Count of Armagnac was the father of three daughters, and suggested that one or other of these might prove a suitable bride for the young King of England. The proposal found favour in this country, and an embassy, consisting of Sir Robert Roos, Dr. Thomas Bekynton, and Sir Edward Hull of Enmore in Somerset, was accordingly dispatched to Bordeaux to conduct the negotiations. This is certainly the most entertaining episode in the whole of Bekynton's career, and fortunately we possess not only a small collection of his private letters, written on his journey,¹ but also a very full diary of his doings from day to day, which was kept by one of his suite. A translation of this was edited by Sir Harris Nicolas, and published in 1828,² and in it we can trace Bekynton's footsteps and proceedings from his start at Windsor on June 5th, 1442, till his return to England and audience with the king at Shene, on February 26th, 1443.

From Windsor the journey was made by easy stages to Plymouth, whence he was to sail for Bordeaux, stopping at Henley-on-Thames, his living of Sutton Courtney, Great Bedwyn, where he held a prebend, and Devizes, and from thence, by way of his native place, Beckington, where he stopped for dinner, and whither the Lord de Hungerford sent him two flagons of wine in bottles, to Wells, where he supped, and the next day "drank with the precentor, and

¹ *The Letters of Queen Margaret of Anjou.* Ed. Cecil. (Camden Soc., 1863.)

² *A Journal by one of the Suite of Thomas Beckington.* With Notes and Illustrations. By Nicholas Harris Nicolas, Esq. London. 1828. The Journal, in the original Latin, French, and English, is given in an Appendix to *Bekynton's Correspondence*, vol. ii, p. 177, seq.

was there installed in the choir " as Prebendary of Worminster, to which stall he had been collated by Bishop Stafford some three years before. From Wells he passed to Glastonbury, where he supped with the Abbot, who " lent his lordship a horse ;" and so to Taunton, whence he turned aside to Enmore, to visit his colleague in the embassy, Sir E. Hull, and hold conference with him on the state of Guienne, the country for which they were bound. The information which he received from Sir Edward caused considerable alarm to the worthy doctor, who wrote forthwith to the king and to the Lord Chancellor, expressing his fears lest the embassy should be " nought or little fructeux," and his own person should be in jeopardy. In spite of his fears, however, he went forward past Tiverton to the castle of the Earl of Devon, where he dined, and it is recorded in the diary that he " afterwards drank on the road to Exeter, and there supped and passed the night." At Exeter he spent some days, dining with the dean, the chancellor and some of the prebendaries, and receiving a present of a buck from Tiverton. This we gather from the diary, but Bekynton's own letters from Exeter show that he was not altogether satisfied with the good cheer provided for him by the hospitable Chapter, for he complains of " being now in the uttermost parts of the world," and " in the land of wilderness," where, as he says twice over, there is " fern and fiefs enough, but good ale none or little." Still rather anxious " touching the great jeopardy in passing unto the country that we be sent unto," he rode forward to Plymouth, where he received letters from the king modifying the instructions previously given, which had apparently specified one of the count's daughters in particular to be treated for, whereas now the king was anxious that they should treat in general that he might have the choice ; and therefore in order that he might be guided in his decision he wished them to employ an artist to paint the portraits of all the three ladies " in their kertelles simple, and their visages, like as ye see their stature and their beauty, and

colour of skin, and their countenances, with all manner of features ; and that one be delivered in all haste with the said portraiture to bring it unto the king, and he to appoint and assign which him liketh." Fortified with these fresh instructions, Bekynton and Sir Robert Roos embarked on board the *Katharine* of Bayonne, at 6 p.m. on Tuesday, July 10th, and landed at Bordeaux on the afternoon of Monday the 16th, when they " breakfasted with Sir Robert Clifton, Constable of the Castle, and supped at an inn." And now began a long and weary time of waiting, for the English cause in Guienne was steadily losing ground, and (perhaps not unnaturally under the circumstances) the Count of Armagnac was playing a waiting game. It was but a sorry tale that the ambassadors had to report to the king, of the loss of town after town which fell into the hands of the French king, who was ravaging the country almost up to the gates of Bordeaux itself. Still they remained at their post, and on October 22nd Sir Edward Hull, the third of the commissioners, joined them from England, bringing with him Hans the painter, who was to take the likenesses of the three ladies, and who was at once sent forward to begin his work, with letters to the count's council making suggestions for pushing forward the negotiations with regard to such important matters as the bride's dowry, the trousseau, styled " the paraphernalia or female ornaments, commonly called *le chambre*," the place to which the bride should be conducted at " the charge and expense of his lordship, with the homage, etc." This looked more like business ; but still the matter dragged, though on November 22nd the arrival of the artist was reported, and the commissioners were informed that he was " every day diligently employed on the work for which he came."

Some time later they were assured that within four or five days the first of the three portraits would be on the canvass, and the others would soon be finished. A month

later the ambassadors had to write again to complain of the delay, and to beg that the artist might be sent back to them as soon as possible, as they were evidently in despair of bringing the negotiations to a satisfactory conclusion. There was no response to this for some time, and the year drew to a close with no change of the position. The new year opened with an amusing exchange of presents. Beckington gave his companions each a scarlet hat, and received himself two pots of green ginger, some spiced wine mixed with honey, and wafers, as well as apples; and from the lady of the inn he received a mysterious gift described as "lemog fixed in a rod of lorey with a little book in the middle" (*lemogiam fixam in una virgula de lorey cum libello in medio*), which the editor of the diary interprets as something good to eat, consisting of a lemon and sweetmeats. The festival was scarcely over before the ambassadors lost patience, and determined to return to England without further delay. Accordingly on Jan. 10th Beckington embarked, without the portraits, in the *Helen* of London. Scarcely had he done so when letters arrived stating that one of the portraits was really finished, and explaining how the work had been delayed by the severe cold which congealed the painter's colours, so that he could not complete it sooner. It was added that he was beginning to work at the others, which he hoped to finish shortly, "weather permitting." The letters came too late to prevent Beckington's departure. He only heard of them after his arrival in England. He finally sailed from Bordeaux on Jan. 14th, putting in on his way at the port of Crowdon in Brittany, where, says the diarist, he "heard masses, and afterwards my lord ate oysters." He arrived at Falmouth on Sunday, Feb. 10th, and thence made his way to Maidenhead, where he found the king, and made his report, the journey having proved, as he had all along anticipated that it would, "little fructeux." A few days later he dined with the king at Shene, and so the diary ends. The king never got his pictures to select his bride

from, and, as everybody knows, within two years married, not one of the three daughters of the Count of Armagnac, but that strong-willed lady who so completely dominated him, Margaret, the daughter of René of Anjou, titular King of Naples, Sicily and Jerusalem.

I have dwelt at some length on this episode in Beckington's life, because it is probably new to most of my hearers, and gives an interesting picture of the times; but I must pass rapidly over the events of his episcopate. The reward of his services was not long in coming. Almost immediately upon his return he was appointed Keeper of the Privy Seal, nor was ecclesiastical preferment delayed much longer. To tell the truth, he himself had done a good deal to make the way for this easy, by lavish presents of scarlet broad cloth and other gifts to the Pope himself, and to some of his officials at Rome some years before, for details of which the curious must be referred to the volumes of his official correspondence.¹ Anyhow, when on the death of Archbishop Chicheley a few months after Bekynton's return to England, John Stafford, Bishop of Bath and Wells, was translated to Canterbury, the vacant See, which, as the vacancy was due to translation, was "provided for" by the Pope, was refused by Ayscough, Bishop of Salisbury, the king had no difficulty in securing it for his secretary,² and Bekynton was consecrated on Oct. 13th, 1443, in the old collegiate church of Eton, and celebrated his first mass *in pontificalibus* in the chapel of the king's new college there, the walls of which were sufficiently

¹ See *Correspondence*, vol. i, Letters 124, 165, 166, 167, 168, 124, 178, 179, 180, 181.

² There are several letters in the *Correspondence* concerning the appointment. Apparently it was expected that Ayscough would go to Wells, and that Bekynton would succeed him at Salisbury; and Bekynton was over hasty in paying the first-fruits on appointment to the last-mentioned See, which, however, he seems to have been allowed to transfer to Wells, and thus was saved from having to pay them twice. See *Correspondence*, vol. i, Letters 115, 125, 126, 127, 177, 187, 225.

advanced for this purpose, with the help of a tent for a roof.¹

Up till now Bekynton's career had been far more that of a courtier and statesman than of an ecclesiastic, and "his personal history after he became bishop," says the late Mr. Gairdner, "is uninteresting."² For some little time he was apparently still employed in the king's service, and the diocese was administered by suffragans, the first of whom, James, Bishop of Achonry (who also acted as Suffragan of Salisbury and Worcester), received his commission a fortnight after Bekynton's consecration. Later on the same post was held by John, Bishop of Tenos *in partibus infidelium*, while William, Bishop of Zidon, also appears to have helped for a time.³

The twenty-one years of Bekynton's episcopate (he died at Wells in January, 1465) were troublous ones for the country, as they witnessed the outbreak of the Wars of the Roses, the battles of St. Albans, Wakefield, and Towton, and the proclamation of Edward IV as king; but the diocese of Bath and Wells seems to have suffered from the disturbances of the time less than some others, nor did the bishop attempt to follow the fortunes of the king whom he had served for so many years. He was excused from attendance in Parliament on the ground of age and infirmity in 1452, and again in 1461, and his episcopate as a whole must be pronounced uneventful, although he was an active administrator, and there are episodes in his government of the diocese which ought not to be overlooked, as, for instance, his inquiry into the "various excesses and abuses" prevailing among the vicars choral in 1450, and his publication of fresh ordinances for them, in addition to those of Ralf of Shrewsbury, who first incorporated them as a

¹ Registrum Stafford, fol. clvii, 6, quoted in *Correspondence*, vol. i, p. cxix.

² *Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. ii, p. 87.

³ Stubbs, *Registrum Sacrum*, pp. 199, 200, 208.

college. To this may be added his correspondence with the Abbot of Glastonbury, over which he claimed the right of visitation, a correspondence which exhibits him in the light of one whom it would be better to have as a friend than an opponent ; and lastly his regulations for the observance of decency by the bathers at Bath.

But that which gives him a special claim to be remembered in Wells is his work as a builder and princely benefactor of the city. The cathedral church itself was already complete, and if Bekynton did nothing to the fabric it was, as the late Professor Freeman has said, "because there was really nothing for him to do." The surroundings, however, owe much to him. It is believed that the western wing of the cloisters, with the rooms above it, and the organist's house hard by—now, alas! a ruin, but which some among us can well remember as still standing—was his work. Hard by the spot where we are met together stands the matchless "Chain Gateway," uniting the cathedral church, by means of the Chapter House stairs, with the Vicar's Close on the other side of the road, and this is certainly due to him. The original Close itself is the work of Ralf of Shrewsbury, and the chapel at the north end of it of Bubwith ; but Bekynton or his executors repaired the houses throughout, and added the room above the chapel. It was he, too, who erected the three famous gateways leading from the city to the palace and the cathedral green, locally known as the Bishop's Eye, the Penniless Porch, and Brown's Gateway. The Palace was much in need of repair when he came into possession of it, and he could get nothing from his predecessor. Accordingly he spent large sums of money upon it in his lifetime, and left £100 to his successor for dilapidations.

Much of his work here has since been destroyed, including a tower, and cloister to form an inner court ; but there is

¹ *Cathedral Church of Wells*, p. 145.

apparently a good deal still remaining.¹ Besides this, he built a range of fifteen houses on the north side of the market place, which he granted to the Dean and Chapter. The houses are still standing, though sadly modernised; and a further benefaction of his to the city was the conduit erected in the palace gardens, and connected with the high cross in the market place, thus furnishing the city with a constant supply of running water. The deed of gift still remains among the MSS. belonging to the cathedral church, where those who are interested in such matters may read the condition attached to it: "For this benefit the master and burgesses grant that they and their successors shall once a year visit the place where the said bishop is buried in the Church of St. Andrew, to render prayers to God for his soul."² Whether the condition is still fulfilled to-day it is for the Mayor and Corporation to tell us.

One other work of Bekynton's remains to be mentioned, and that is his own tomb in the cathedral, which he consecrated on January 15th, 1452 (just thirteen years before his death), when we are told that he "said mass for his own soul, for the souls of his parents, and of all the faithful dead, in the presence of a vast congregation gathered to gaze on their great bishop, decked in all the ornaments of his office." The actual tomb is still there, with its two effigies of the bishop as he appeared both in life and in death, in the south ambulatory of the choir, but alas! it has been robbed of its splendour, for the chapel which surrounded it is gone. When Britton published his volume on Wells Cathedral in 1824 he describes the chapel as "now most lamentably broken and defaced," but it was still standing, between the second and

¹ See the account given by Chyle in Reynolds's *Wells Cathedral*, p. li, and Chancellor Holmes' description of the Palace in the *Proceedings of the Somersetshire Archaeological and Natural History Society*, 3rd Series, vol. xv (1909), p. 42.

² *Calendar of the MSS. of the Dean and Chapter of Wells*, vol. 1, p. 433.

third arches from the east end of the choir on the south side, and a representation of it is given in plate xiv of his work, with the following description :—

“ This (*i.e.* the chantry) is designed in the most florid style of decorated architecture ; and, although partly of wood, excites great interest for the excellence of its execution and the elaborate manner in which it is wrought. The western side is entirely open with the exception of a compartment of rich screen work near the top, which, among other ornaments, exhibits two demi-angels displaying shields of the five wounds and having large expanded wings, the feathers of which are so profusely spread as to fill the spandrils below the cornices. All the canopy or roof is underwrought with elaborate tracery, including pendants, quatrefoils, panelled arches, etc. On the south side is a small piscina, and over the eastern end is an enriched canopy. Small graduated buttresses, having rich pinnacles, sustain the sides of the chapel, and the mouldings of the cornice are ornamented with rosettes and fruited vine branches.”

To-day we look in vain for the chapel. The canopy indeed exists, but all the rest is destroyed, and even the canopy has been rudely divorced from the tomb to which it belongs, and now stands in a meaningless position in the Chapel of St. Calixtus in the south transept, where it serves as a sort of baldachino to a hideous modern stove.¹ It was therefore with real joy that some of us read not long since in the appeal for funds for various necessary works put forth by the present Dean and Chapter this mention of their desire to replace in its original position the canopy of Bishop Bekynton's tomb. “ The restoration of this chantry, con-

¹ This statement is, I am happy to say, already out of date, as the stove referred to above has already been removed by the Dean and Chapter (Dec., 1913), but the canopy still remains divorced from the shrine.

templated by the Chapter in 1899 and abandoned on account of expense, would be a duty of gratitude to a great bishop, one of the chief benefactors to our church and city, and the recovery of a most stately historical monument, solemnly dedicated in the fifteenth century, and desecrated in the nineteenth."

I need hardly add that the Dean and Chapter will have the warm sympathy, and, I trust, the generous support of all who love the Church of Wells in their laudable endeavour to replace the canopy in its rightful position.

One word only remains to be added to complete this slight sketch of the history of the famous fifteenth-century prelate. It is that he has not escaped the fate of our own Osric at Gloucester. Like him, he has been spied upon by curious eyes, for nearly four hundred years after his death, in March 1850, his tomb was opened, and his skeleton, that of a tall man with a well-formed skull, was found, though much decayed, yet still lying undisturbed in the place where the body had been originally laid in January, 1465.¹

And here I must end. We cannot claim Thomas Bekynton as one of the saintly bishops, who are not wanting to the See of Bath and Wells. But, as I said at the outset, he deserves to be remembered not only as a typical prelate of the fifteenth century, but also as a generous benefactor not to Wells alone, but to Winchester and Lincoln College, Oxford, also, on both of which he has left his mark; and it will, I hope, add to the pleasure and interest of your visit here to feel that you know something of one of those whose works you will admire, and whom we may fairly style the last of the great episcopal builders of Wells.

¹ See *Correspondence*, vol. i, p. 125