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## **The 'Collegiate' Church of Ledbury**

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## THE "COLLEGIATE" CHURCH OF LEDBURY.

By the Rev. Canon BANNISTER.

THE first mention of the church of Ledbury as *prebendal* is on November 24th, 1276, when the Pope *audita necessitate mensae tuae* authorizes Bishop Cantilupe, its patron, to appropriate it *in proprios usus*, when next it should fall vacant—providing, however, for the maintenance of a suitable vicar.

Next year the bishop takes steps to secure its vacancy by charging James de Aquablanca, "Rector of one prebend of Ledbury," with non-residence and contumacy. The charge is repeated in 1278; and in 1280 James de Aquablanca is actually deprived of the prebend of Netherhall, which the bishop takes over, and administers by his bailiff.<sup>1</sup> Next year (March 25th, 1281), the bishop buys out Adam de Fileby, who holds *prebendam quae vocatur Superior Aula*, for 40 marks sterling.

Cantilupe's successor, Bishop Swinfield, would seem to have had disputes or difficulties as to the prebends of Ledbury. For there is entered in his register, with no explanation or date, an elaborate "counsel's opinion" as to whether the prebends carry with them the cure of souls or not. The lawyer, after much learned disquisition, decides that the cure of souls rests with the vicar, not with the two prebendaries. He states, incidentally, that the Ledbury prebends "have not one head (*unum caput*) nor are one body (*unum corpus*) nor have one seal, nor other things by which the church could be considered

<sup>1</sup> In this same year Walter de Verney is instituted "vicar of the chapel of Park," *assensu portionariorum ecclesiae de Ledbury, prout moris est*. From this it would seem that the portionists had interests in the patronage of the chapel of Park. I do not know where it was. The patronage of Aylton was also shared by the portionists; and "pensions or portions" were paid to them by the Church of Eastnor.

collegiate" (*per quae posset argui collegiata*). A layman may hold a prebend, he adds, in which case the prebend could not carry the cure of souls.

The appropriation of the prebends by Bishop Cantilupe for the service of his table, would seem to have been personal only—for his life—unless, indeed, the taking of counsel's opinion by Bishop Swinfield implies a dispute as to the legality of alienating the prebends. In any case Bishop Orleton, in 1320, appoints his nephew, Thomas de Orleton, to the "sinecure prebend of Ledbury." Next year *the parishioners* appoint John de Prato de Ledbury to "the service of the Blessed Virgin at Ledbury." On two later occasions the vicar appoints to this, "with the consent of the parishioners."

In 1368 Nicholas de Hethe exchanges his prebend of Netherhall with John Lutleye, Canon of Exeter Cathedral—which gives some idea of the relative value of the prebends. (The prebendaries now begin to be commonly called *portionarii*, which word had only rarely been used earlier.)

In 1384 Bishop Gilbert commissions John Barel, B.C.L., to inquire whether the church of Ledbury is parochial or collegiate, the test being, whether it has a common seal, a common chest, a common bell, and chapter-house for common business (*domus capitularis pro communibus tractatibus in eadem habendis*) and whether it has a dean, *prepositus*, master, or custos, or any such *caput principale*. The lawyer's decision is that it is not collegiate but portionary, having two "free portions" vulgarly called Overhall and Netherhall, and a vicarage with a cure of souls: but it has no common seal, no common chest, no common bell, no chapter-house, and no dean or other head.

Yet in 1399 Bishop Trefnant obtains from the crown licence to found a chantry "in the collegiate church of Ledbury for the souls of the king and the bishop."

And in 1401 this is enlarged into permission to establish a college, consisting of a warden and eight chaplains, the revenues of the two prebends being devoted to the endowment of the college. Whether this college ever really got itself into being is doubtful. For in 1407 the bishop appoints to the prebends as usual.

Through all this century (1407-1515) the two portioners are regularly appointed when there is a vacancy. On a loose paper in the archives, dated 1516, giving all the patronage in the hands of the bishop, there is the entry:—*Prebendae sive porciones de Overhalle et Nethirhalle in ecclesia collegiata de Ledbury.* The name, at any rate, of “collegiate” had therefore survived from 1401, if nothing else.

Bishop Skipp (1539-1552) appointed his nephew (or other relative), Richard Skipp, to the prebend of Netherhall; and somehow the prebend became Richard's private property! For he “demised it by will.” The same must have happened to the prebend of Overhall, for it also, somehow, passed into the private possession of Thomas Denton.

Bishop Scory (1559-1585) made a very bad bargain with Queen Elizabeth, exchanging several of the episcopal manors for some almost worthless property. In this exchange the bishop's manor of Ledbury passed to the crown. The law-suit abstracted in the transcript Hereford, no. 124 (*Attorney-General v. Pearshall*) shows that in 1598-9 the queen claimed that the two prebends ought to have passed to her with the manor.