

The Rectors of Berkhamsted

I WONDER HOW MANY—or how few—Berkhamstedians are aware that a rector of St. Peter's was honoured with a tomb among the kings and queens in Westminster Abbey?

This is one of many little-known facts which came to mind after reading letters in the *Review* from readers who questioned whether Robert de Tuardo (1222) was our first rector, and wished to know whether there was any record of a pre-Norman church in Berkhamsted.

We must blend theories with very few facts in attempting to unravel our very complicated early parochial history. Vague suggestions that St. Peter's stands on an older church have never been substantiated, but there are definite traces of a pre-Norman church in St. Mary's, Northchurch. We therefore conclude that the first priest of whom we have documentary evidence (in Domesday Book, 1086) held services at a small, early version of St. Mary's, the mother church of the whole district.

GODFREY THE CHAPLAIN

The name of the Domesday priest is not given, but he must have been a contemporary of our first named priest, Godfrey. Between 1087 and 1104, William, Count of Mortain granted the advowson of the church of Berkhamsted (probably St. Mary's), together with the advowson of the chapel of the castle and the tithes and lands which Godfrey the chaplain held, to the monastery of St. Mary of Grestein, Normandy.

This information comes from the Victoria 'History of Hertfordshire', which identifies Godfrey's chapel with the chapel of St. James. This probably stood near St. James's (afterwards St. John's) Well, and had its own churchyard and parochial rights of burial. The chapel was doubtless used by a new community which lived outside the newly-built Norman castle, a community which in due course required a larger place of worship.

NEW PARISH

Thus, early in the 13th century St. Peter's church was built, and it is reasonable to suppose that the parish of St. Peter was carved out of the large parish of St. Mary at the same time.

What we do not know for certain is when the first rector of St. Peter's was

instituted. It is highly probable that further research will prove that Robert de Tuardo was *not* the first rector; indeed, I always try to remember to say that he was our first *known* rector.

It is significant that the list of some sixty rectors in the parish church, compiled in the 1880s, was expanded to almost eighty names by the late Mr. R. A. Norris when he wrote the church history in 1922.

FREQUENT CHANGES

Looking through the names and dates of our early rectors, I have the impression that they either loved travelling around or did not like Berkhamsted. It is known that many of them held other benefices and made frequent exchanges, usually to augment their stipends.

Robert de Tuardo was here for only a year when he was succeeded by Hugh de London, though our fourth known rector, John de Merse, stayed in Berkhamsted for over thirty years.

In the 14th century, we had no fewer than twenty-four rectors. How many, I wonder, were victims of the Black Death? Ten rectors were instituted between 1369-86, one of whom, Thomas Payn, was succeeded by Thomas de Assheford after a ministry of nine days!

In each of the two succeeding centuries we had sixteen rectors, seven of whom were instituted during the reign of Elizabeth I.

WILLIAM COWPER'S FATHER

I cannot help wondering whether a more comfortable rectory was provided towards the end of Elizabeth's reign. Thomas Newman, instituted in 1597, was the first of seven rectors who between them spanned two whole centuries. Newman was rector for 42 years, and his successor, John Napier, would also have served for 42 years but for the intrusion of David Bramble during the Commonwealth. Bramble was presented by Parliament; the patrons of his predecessors and successors were either the queen or the king.

John Napier was followed in 1681 by Robert Brabant, who was rector for 41 years and was succeeded by John Cowper, father of the poet William. Dr. Cowper's ministry in Berkhamsted

lasted 34 years, and his successor, John Jeffries, was rector for 32 years.

Charles de Guiffadiere, the next rector, was elderly when he was instituted in 1798, and died twelve years later. His successor, John Crofts, was here for 41 years, and during that time he pulled down William Cowper's birthplace and built the 'old' rectory.

LATEST ADDITION

From these facts and figures let me return to early history and give you the name of a rector whose name has not yet been published in local lists. He was John Bilton (1421), who received from Pope Martin V dispensation to hold, with other benefices, the parish church of Berkehamstede Magna, in the diocese of Lincoln. Incidentally, as late as 1845, when Hertfordshire was transferred to the See of Rochester, Berkhamsted remained in the diocese of Lincoln. This is why the old cemetery was consecrated by the bishop of Lincoln in 1842. It was a much earlier bishop of Lincoln, Hugh Wells, who came to Berkhamsted for the induction of Robert de Tuardo in 1222.

Finally, some information about the priest who was buried in Westminster Abbey. He was John Waltham, who was presented to St. Peter's, Berkhamsted, on December 28, 1379, and resigned on April 22, 1381. The large number of parishes to which he was presented was exceptional, and we have no evidence that he ever came to Berkhamsted, unless he visited his great friend, Richard II, at the Castle.

A few months after giving up the Berkhamsted benefice, John Waltham was appointed Master of the Rolls, resigning that office in 1386 to become Keeper of the Privy Seal. Two years later he became bishop of Salisbury.

ROYAL FAVOURITE

In disputes between king and people, John Waltham usually took the side of Richard II. The powerful bishop and rector of Berkhamsted received his greatest honour after death, for Richard II ordered Waltham's tomb to be erected in Edward the Confessor's Chapel in Westminster Abbey, with a fine brass representing him in full canonicals.

As the only person not of royal blood to be buried in the royal chapel, John Waltham was a subject of controversy long after his death. The king's affection for him was regarded as a scandal, and Richard II gave costly presents to the monks to over-rule their objections.

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