

This is the first of an occasional series of articles by David Stone about incidents in the history of Swanton Morley and its church

WILLIAM OF BEVERLEY

A priest who became rector of Swanton Morley after he had been on trial for homicide

William of Beverley was rector of Swanton Morley from January 1372 until 1377. Before looking at his career and the bizarre circumstances under which he came to be accused of homicide it is useful to try to understand the world occupied by fourteenth century clergy, a world which is very strange to modern eyes.

Benefices and prebends

First look at the question of benefices and prebends – for these were the way in which a successful priest made his money. A benefice is a Church appointment for which property and income are provided in return for pastoral duties, and the benefice with which we are most familiar is that of the ‘rectory’ of a parish. (Here ‘rectory’ means the job, not the house.) However, there is another type of benefice which was of great importance in the fourteenth century, and this was the prebend. Just as the parish churches supported a rector, there were some larger collegiate churches, which were endowed to support a chapter of canons, presided over by a dean or provost. Some of these collegiate churches had acquired the status of cathedrals. The endowment of most collegiate churches and cathedrals was divided into prebends, each intended to support a single member of the chapter. The holders of prebends became known as prebendaries.

The next thing to note is that, just because you were a rector or a prebendary, did not mean that you actually had to do the job. In a parish the rector would receive the ‘great tithes’ – all the customary offerings and dues of his parish. However, he did not even have to live in the parish. It was very common for the rector to pay a salaried priest or chaplain to do the job for him, and to pocket the difference. Much the same held for prebends; by the fourteenth century they had come to be treated as sinecures, whose duties would be performed by paid deputies. Even more lucrative was the holding of so-called ‘dignities’, which were the officers of the college, such as precentor, chancellor and treasurer.

Another excellent source of income was to be appointed by the bishop as an archdeacon, who was a senior clergyman having administrative authority over a number of parishes. Here again the job might be given to a royal or papal official, the work being done by a paid substitute. We shall see that the peak of William’s career was to be appointed Archdeacon of Northumberland, one of the two archdeaconries in the diocese of Durham.

Now, although a priest could not hold two rectories at the same time, he could hold a rectory and a prebend or (as in William’s case) a rectory and an archdeaconry. Such priests were called pluralists. Exchanging one benefice (or prebend) for another was common practice; indeed it was essential for an ambitious priest. William was not only a pluralist but he was also an inveterate exchanger. In fact he was probably also a broker arranging deals on commission for other priests.

The details of William’s complex series of exchanges in progressing his career do not concern us here. It is sufficient to note that by September 1370 he was Archdeacon of Northumberland and held the prebend of Stillington in York Minster. He had held the post for about a year and there is the suspicion that in this brief time he had managed to upset at least some of his flock.

The killing of Hugh of the Buttery

On the evening of Tuesday, 17 September 1370, Beverley was one of a party assembled with Bishop Hatfield in the rectory house at Wolsingham. It is probable that there were only two private rooms, one of which the solar or upper chamber at the far end of the hall would have been reserved for the bishop. We know that the archdeacon occupied a room at the lower end, approached by a stair which mounted from near the buttery to an upper floor. The rest of the company probably found accommodation in the hall, or in such casual lodgings as were available. According to the verdict of an inquest subsequently held by the sheriff of Durham, the bare facts of what happened that evening are as follows.

After the bishop had retired to bed, the archdeacon was in charge of the company. At least he claimed to be, but the parish of Wolsingham did not lie within the jurisdiction of the archdeaconry of Northumberland – it belonged to that of Durham, and this may perhaps have lain behind the quarrel. Anyway, words then arose between the archdeacon and one Nicholas Skelton following a quarrel between two serving men. Skelton then attacked the archdeacon, who attempted to retire upstairs to his room. But, before he could get there, Thomas, one of Skelton's servants ran after him and assailed him at close quarters with the obvious intention of killing him. Beverley, seeing the prospect of death so near, and with so little chance of escape, flung a broken knife at his pursuer in self-defence. Thomas, however, protected himself by pushing Hugh of the Buttery (one of the bishop's household, from Auckland) in the way of the missile. The knife struck Hugh's head and inflicted a deadly wound from which he died on the next day, or shortly after.

The sheriff's inquest acquitted him of all blame of intentional homicide. However, William was guilty, whether intentionally or not, of bloodshed, and this brought him within the limits of ecclesiastical jurisdiction. In order to continue to hold office he had to clear himself of the charge; in the meantime he was held in the bishop's prison in Durham Castle.

In October 1370 a commission was appointed by the bishop to try the case. Many further details emerged during this trial, but the basic story remained much the same. The outcome was that on 7 December 1370 William offered to make full 'purgation'. Canonical purgation was the act of justifying one's self, when accused of some offence; this would be done in the presence of a number of persons worthy of credit ('compurgators'), generally twelve, who would swear they believed the accused. Accordingly, the purgation was arranged to be made at Auckland the following week. (This seems to indicate unusual haste on the bishop's part.) In the meantime Beverley was sent back to the bishop's gaol. It was on 7 January 1371 that the bishop declared that Beverley had sufficiently and lawfully proved his innocence and made his purgation. He was therefore guiltless and the bishop restored him to his previous 'good fame' and imposed silence on all gainsayers. It has been suggested that this declaration may have been in the nature of a pre-emptive strike, calculated to avoid the awful prospect of a guilty verdict against a very senior cleric. If so, it failed, for in very unusual circumstances he had to face a new secular trial. He was acquitted but by then he had lost any good reputation that he may have retained.

William had continued to exchange while he was in gaol and on 23 January 1371 he exchanged his archdeaconry for a prebend at St Stephen's, Westminster. He then left County Durham for a safer environment. In November 1371 he exchanged another prebend for the benefice of Stanground near Peterborough, only to exchange that in turn for Swanton Morley in January 1372. He held Swanton Morley until 1377, when he was succeeded by Master John Babingly. This was not long before the death in 1379 of Sir William de Morley, who was the patron of the living. However, we do not know whether William was ever resident in Swanton Morley during this time; he may well have appointed a deputy so as to allow him to spend his time more lucratively at St Stephen's.