

Bishops through the centuries

Most visitors to the Palace have little idea what a bishop does and most assume he runs the cathedral.

This talk will look at the role of bishops through the centuries, which has changed and evolved. A modern bishop's role has marked differences to his medieval counterpart's.

Early Bishops

In the early days, before the 10th century, a bishop lived a common life with the cathedral clergy and he was their only head. Originally the cathedral church was the bishop's church and the bishop celebrated in it regularly, assisted by his cathedral clergy. The cathedral clergy also formed a kind of council, advising and helping him in the administration of his diocese

From the earliest days bishops had a set of duties to both the Pope and their diocese.

Bishops duties to the Pope

- To enforce canon law
- To implement the decrees of general Papal councils
- To carry out Papal mandates and Instructions

Bishops duties to his diocese

- To be the shepherd of the clergy and laity
- To carry out ordinations, following detailed examinations of candidates
- To hold synods to make diocesan statutes
- To carry out visitations of cathedrals, parishes and other religious bodies such as monasteries, almshouses etc
- To establish consistory courts with jurisdiction over marriage, sexual crimes, legitimacy, wills, libel, breach of contract, heresy, witchcraft, church offences and clergy discipline

10th Century to the Reformation

Gradually, the bishop was more and more drawn away from his cathedral city both on affairs of state and looking after his large diocese. During his long absences there began a sort of home government among the cathedral clergy and by the 10th century chapters were taking control of their own affairs and increasingly began to assume a position of independence.

They became the electoral body for bishops and in 1215 the 4th Lateran Council recognised cathedral chapters as having the sole right to elect bishops. Normally the Pope nominated and chapters elected but frequent disputes with monarchs caused problems and in some countries Kings assumed control.

The theory of episcopal election continued but it ceased to have any practical value as Chapters could only elect the person nominated.

In England in the 13th and 14th centuries chapters continued to claim increasing independence of their bishops to the point where some bishops found it advisable to stay away from their cathedral cities as much as possible. Deans and chapters came to be regarded as rulers of an autonomous republic within the diocese.

Most disputes between bishops and chapters related to property, money and jurisdiction over the chapter. The role of the dean was complicated as he was nominated by the bishop and took an oath of allegiance to him but then tried to remain independent.

In the late 1200s and early 1300s bishops in England tried to reassert their authority over chapters and chapters flexed their muscles to remain independent. The chapters of Wells, Lichfield , Chichester and Salisbury worked together to create a common approach and supported each other in resisting the attempt by their bishops to regain control.

Bishop Drokensford's problems with the Chapter

Until 1244 Wells was not a Cathedral but bishops had treated the chapter as if it was. Reginald, Savaric and Jocelyn had signed a number of charters setting out the privileges of the chapter giving it a degree of independence.

Bishop Drokensford (1309 – 1329), who had been a royal servant of great influence and power became bishop and found that he had restricted power in his own cathedral. It is perhaps inevitable that he found himself in collision with another formidable character, Dean Godlee. The dispute centred on Drokensford's demand that he be able to visit the deanery and all members of the Chapter. The canons claimed exemption from this visitation and appealed to the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Pope. Arbiters were called in and the Chapter's records and archive were sufficiently good for them to be able to establish a case based on ancient custom.

The dispute started in 1319 and Drokensford capitulated in 1321 and confirmed that Wells and the prebendal estates were exempt from visitation and at the Cathedral the Bishop was not allowed to examine canons singly. The Dean alone answered questions from the Bishop in the Chapter House. In true medieval way, to ensure that relations were not too acrimonious, the Chapter blamed the dispute on one of the bishop's advisors.

This dispute set the terms of the relationship between the Chapter and Bishops for the next centuries. Clearly, the relationship between a bishop and the dean varied from cathedral to cathedral and was much influenced by the personalities involved but in Wells the Drokensford dispute set the ground rules and on the whole relations between the two for the next three centuries worked smoothly.

Bishops in the later Middle Ages

As kingdoms developed Kings more and more relied on educated men to help them administer their countries. The church was the main source of literate, able people and kings came to rely on clergy to be their administrators. To pay them the kings gave them proceeds from church livings and the higher they rose the more church livings they acquired. Pluralism, as it was called, became a major source of concern but monarchs found it a convenient way to pay staff. Many of these administrators were appointed as bishops as reward for their service.

In Wells case we have a number of examples. Robert Burnell (1275 – 92) was very close to Edward I and was his Chancellor (roughly Prime Minister), John Drokensford (1309-29) had been Chancellor to Edward II, Ralph of Shrewsbury (1329 – 63) was unusual, in that he did not seem to have served the King. Nicholas Bubwith (1407-24) from obscure beginnings served in a number of roles rising to Treasurer of the Realm. As the King's servant he held many church posts without becoming a priest and was not ordained until immediately before becoming a bishop. In 1400, not a priest, he was estimated to have an annual income from church positions of £800 pa (based on average earnings that would be worth £4.86 million today).

Thomas Beckington (1443-65), the son of a weaver rose to become Henry VI's secretary, Keeper of the Privy Seal and an ambassador. He was very wealthy before he became bishop, a post he received as a reward for his service.

Whilst many bishops came into post as wealthy men they continued to amass wealth as bishops. They were paid as bishops the income from estates in Somerset owned by the church. By 1535 Bath and Wells owned 26 manors, 5 townships, 5 hundreds and a London house. All the rent went to the bishop. Until the Reformation bishops could not marry and could not have heirs so that bishops had no incentive to accumulate wealth and some were prepared to put money back into churches, cathedrals, almshouses etc.

Living in the Bishop's Palace

We pride ourselves on being the residence of the Bishop of Bath and Wells for 8 centuries but bishops have had irregular relationships with the Palace. Two never came here at all – Cardinal Hadrian Costello (1504-18) and Cardinal Thomas Wolsey (1518-23), though they were happy to take the income.

Robert Stillington (1466-91), despite being bishop for 25 years, is only known to have spent two weeks in Wells in his entire episcopacy. Robert Burnell only came to Wells for Lent every year .

Other bishops did not spend much time in Wells preferring to stay in some of their other manors. Ralph of Shrewsbury spent much of his time on his estate in Wiveliscombe and others, even up to George Law (1824-45), preferred the house at Banwell. Evercreech was popular until it was pulled down.

Bishop William Barlow(1548-53) had to give up many of the houses, including Banwell, to Edward VI and his Protector Somerset . Finally, in 1550, he had to give up the Palace to Somerset and moved into the Deanery. Somerset' successor Sir John Gates sold the lead roof of the Great Hall during his tenure. The next bishop lived at Wiveliscombe and managed to recover both the Palace and the house at Banwell .

The Bishop's Palace during the Civil War

William Piers (1632-70) had a difficult time in Wells. When he first arrived in 1632 he fell out with the City Council over the traditional gift to a new bishop of a bowl and a pair of gloves for his wife. He cut off the supply of water through the conduit to the market place until the gifts were forthcoming. By 1640 his relations with the diocese were so bad that a group of gentry petitioned parliament and he was impeached and ended up in the Tower of London for around 2 years. Not surprisingly he did not return to Somerset but went to his estates in Sunbury, Middx, and then to Denton in Oxford.

The Palace remained without a bishop for the next 20 years and only returned to Piers in 1660 when parts of it were occupied by tenants who could not be removed. Piers spent £5000 (£9.4million) on repairs. Many of the succeeding bishops began to use the Palace more and some worked on its fabric but Banwell still had its attractions and bishops stayed there.

Bishops residences after the Civil War

Peter Mews (1673-84) and Thomas Ken both used the Palace and Richard Kidder (1691-1703) and his wife were in residence when the chimney came through the roof and killed them both. John Wynne (1727-43) preferred his family home in Flintshire, Edward Willes (1743-73) and Charles Moss (1774-1802) preferred their homes in fashionable London. George Law preferred the seclusion of his house in Banwell and even Richard Bagot (1845-54) who did so much rebuilding spent much time at an exclusive address in Brighton.

Since the mid 1850s the Palace has been much more of a home to bishops and over time the office function in the Palace has become more important.

Today's bishops

The election of bishops today is based on the Appointment of Bishops Act of 1533.

The process starts with Royal Letters Missive and Conge d'elire. The Conge d'elire is a Licence under the Great Seal directed to the Cathedral Chapter to require them to proceed to the Election of a Bishop, with the Letter Missive telling them the name of the person to be elected. The Chapter have 12 days to carry out the election.

Theoretically, the power to elect archbishops and bishops is vested in the diocesan cathedral's college of canons. Practically, however, the choice of the archbishop or bishop is made prior to the election. The prime minister chooses from amongst a set of nominees proposed by the Crown Nominations Commission; the sovereign then instructs the college of canons to elect the nominated individual as a bishop. No longer can a nomination be a lay person who is ordained just before the consecration as a bishop. Thomas Becket became a priest less than 24 hours before becoming Archbishop of Canterbury.

A modern bishop is no longer a wealthy person as most were in the middle ages. Present stipends for bishops are in the middle income range.

There are 43 diocese in England and 108 bishops (including suffragan bishops).

Today a bishop enters the House of Lords based on seniority and length of service. The Lords Spiritual of the United Kingdom, also called Spiritual Peers, are the 26 bishops of the established Church of England who serve in the House of Lords. The occupants of the five "great sees"—Canterbury, York, London, Durham and Winchester—are always spiritual peers and Lords of Parliament. Of the remaining 37 bishops, the 21 most senior sit in the House of Lords.

How do modern bishops compare with their medieval predecessors?

Taking the list on page 1 many of the duties remain the same.

In place of the duties to the Pope a modern bishop is responsible for

Enforcing canon law

Enforcing decrees of the Synod

Enforcing decrees of the Archbishop of Canterbury (or York in the north)

The bishop's duties to the diocese remain the same apart except that the establishment of a consistory court's jurisdiction has been greatly curtailed and now only covers church matters.

Bishop's relations with their cathedrals

Bishops spend more of their time relating to their diocese and the outer world than they do to their cathedrals. Day to day administration of the diocese is carried out from the Diocesan Office under the control of the Diocesan Secretary.

The Bishop of Bath and Wells or Taunton will always officiate in the Cathedral for

Easter

Christmas midnight service

Ordination services (though they can be performed elsewhere in the diocese)

The Legal Service (the annual service for the High Sheriff and legal officers)

Holy Week blessing of the Oil and renewal of Clergy Ordination Vows

When invited or when the bishop has asked for permission for a particular service

In all a bishop would expect to be in the cathedral officially 10 – 15 times a year

As a member of the congregation a bishop is always welcome and our bishop attends Morning Prayer with the Chapter on a weekly basis when he is in Wells.

To help maintain contact the Dean is also a member of the Bishop's Staff Meetings which occur in the Palace.

Visitations

Bishops may formally demand a Visitation which is the act of an ecclesiastical superior who in the discharge of his office visits persons or places with a view of maintaining faith and discipline, and of correcting abuses by the application of proper remedies. This is a rarely used power.

In January this year Dr Rowan Williams ordered an archiepiscopal visitation of the Diocese of Chichester to ensure that recommendations of child protection policies made by Baroness Butler-Sloss are implemented.

Historic Bishop's Palaces open to the public

Wells Bishop's Palace is owned by the Church Commissioners and leased to the Palace Trustees who are responsible for making it pay its way. The recent development project has been based on investing in the Palace to create a visitor attraction that the West can be proud of. By attracting more visitors the income should rise to make the Palace financially secure. The cost of the project has been borne by the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Church Commissioners and a number of very generous donors.

Wells is unique to have such a Palace that will be open to the Public the year round.