

Great Hall handout

Michael Blandford & David Smith

February 2011

Bishop Robert Burnell

Born c 1239 Died 25.10 1292 Body buried in Wells Cathedral Nave and heart in Bath Abbey

Chancellor of England 1274 – 1292

Bishop Bath and Wells 1275 – 1292

Family from Acton Burnell in Shropshire.

Close friend of Prince Edward (subsequently Edward I). Initially worked as a clerk in Royal Chancery and later as a member of Prince Edward's household. Chancellor in the household and came to prominence when Prince Edward left him in charge of his affairs when he went on Crusade.

Edward's father Henry III died 1272 whilst Edward was on Crusade and for two years Burnell was one of four Regents ruling England. Burnell supervised Parliament, fought Welsh and negotiated trade deals.

Became **Chancellor of England** when Edward I returned in 1274.

Prince Edward tried to have him elected Archbishop of Canterbury in 1270 and in 1278, when he was king. On both occasions election was blocked by Pope after an investigation into his lifestyle. He also tried to have him elected to Winchester in 1280, with the same result.

He was rumoured to have a long term mistress – Juliana – and 4 sons and 2 daughters. He said children were close relatives and he arranged good marriages for the girls (Amabilia and Joan). One boy – William Burnell - went on to be Dean of Wells Cathedral 1292–5 and Bp Burnell's executor.

Burnell was a royal spokesman on a mission to Paris, administrator of Gascony and was very involved in Edward's campaigns in Wales. Despite his high office and many travels Burnell came to Wells for Lent each year.

Huscroft has suggested that he may have been the most important royal administrator of 13th Century.

Died very wealthy. 82 manors in 19 counties.

Burnell was a great builder

Wells Cathedral Chapter House steps, undercroft and may have seen start of Chapter House (completed 1306). Also obtained a licence to build a crenellated wall around Cathedral and its precincts.

Involved in the building of some Welsh castles

Acton Burnell

Bishop's Palace Chapel and Great Hall

THE GREAT HALL

Bp Burnell's splendid dining and entertaining hall built c.1290 is the third largest secular hall in England after Canterbury and Westminster Palace.

The design is based on the Great Hall at Lincoln and built, as the Bishop's Chapel, of red and yellow Triassic limestone of the Early English Decorative Gothic style.

The English Decorative style can be observed by the wonderfully large windows, as in the Bishop's Chapel, spanning almost the complete elevation of the hall and set within deep window casements flanked by Blue Lias shafts that rise from sill to springer at the window head; they are of two lights divided by a transom. Burnell's hall windows show an early example of linked-panel tracery. Below the transom the window would have had shutters, while the upper held glass. *See western solar window for shutter hook irons.*

William Worcestre (c. 1415 – c. 1482), recorded that the Hall was of a traditional aisled structure with a nave and side aisles; it is believed the roof, lead on wood, was probably supported by clustered marble piers but limited archeology in 1970s failed to find evidence of pillars. Known as 'end-halls', it had two spaces; the 5-bay hall and the 'solar', (bishop's private rooms), at the west end above lower chambers comprising of a pantry and buttery with a door leading through to the kitchen. The 'high-table' would have been at the east end. Along with the solar the south west turret was also a 'garderobe' which has been described as, 'The finest medieval loo in England'.

Just below the crenellations there are passageways that would lead from one end to the other including passageway to the Chapel.

The ceremonial porch was of two stories with vaulted ceiling to the lower space. To the right, (west) of the porch, stone steps lead to a door, (still visible) that gained access to the solar. The outline markings of the porch are a very good indication to the grandeur of this porch. During the 13th century, the ceremonial porch became a symbolic place of entry for the lord. In 1244, Henry III gave orders to, "*have an entrance which befits such a palace, so that the King may dismount from his palfrey with dignity and make his way beneath it*". It was still there in 1733 when Samuel and Nathaniel Buck showed it in an engraving. By the time a plan was made by John Carter 1784-95 it had been removed.

What will be noticed by visitors and must be explained is why the ground floor doorways and windows are so low to the ground – this will be expanded on later.

Why? - Why such a great hall, why so big, what for?

In the 13th century there was trend for bishops to enlarge their palaces to reflect their position in society, also, Burnell's aspirations for the country's highest ecclesiastical office and to enhance the prestige of Wells as an Episcopal centre. In addition, there was the need to accommodate court visits and the increase in the size of Episcopal households.

HISTORY

Unfortunately, there are not that many recorded events that took place in the Great Hall; some that are recorded and worth retelling are:

In 1331, Edward III spent Christmas here with such a large entourage that Bp. Ralph of Shrewsbury had to spend Christmas at one of the other palaces at Wookey and Banwell.

In 1337, Bp. Ralph held a great feast for some 268 people, it cost him £6.10s.7½p

In November 1539, the last abbot of Glastonbury Abbey, Richard Whiting and his treasurer John Throne with another monk, Roger James were tried here for treason against Henry VIII. Thomas Cromwell had Whiting initially taken to the Tower of London and then brought back here for the trial. They were found guilty and taken to Glastonbury where all three were fastened upon hurdles and dragged by horses to the mount of Glastonbury Tor where they were hanged, drawn and quartered. Whiting's head was displayed on the gate to the abbey and his limbs distributed throughout the region.

1552 Sir John Gates acquired the lead and timber from the roof (and blew up Stillington's Chapel in the Cathedral camery).

1553 Sir John Gates executed with his patron the Duke of Northumberland by Queen Mary for their part in the Lady Jane Grey plot

1820s Bishop George Henry Law (1824-45) turned the still standing walls into a romantic backdrop for his remodeled Picturesque style garden by removing the south and east walls. The removed stone was later used for repairs and building work above the Long Gallery. At the same time, the ground level was raised to its present level.

1829 Richard Colt Hoare described the Great hall as *magnificent even in its ruins, and forms the principal ornament of the Episcopal Palace, owing to the good taste and judgment of the present worthy Prelate; who by taking down the walls, has introduced it into the most beautiful flower garden imaginable where it forms a picturesque object.*

1843 Bp Law was declared *incapable by reason of mental infirmity of duly performing his Episcopal Function*