

## Bishops as Lords of Wells and their Palace c.909 - c.1860

About 1500 years ago, there was no town or village of Wells and no bishop. However, near the springs were the remains of ancient and Roman occupation and a few scattered farmsteads. Also, some muddy tracks led to Bristol and Bath to the north, Shepton Mallet to the east, Glastonbury to the south, and Cheddar and Axbridge to the west.

So, how did the city of Wells arise, and why was the bishop its lord?

### The Early Beginnings

The early beginnings of Wells and its church are unclear as the ancient charters and documents sometimes give contradictory information. It is uncertain, but there was possibly a chapel near the ancient cultic spring called Wielea around the 400 and 500s. It is also uncertain if the early Wells church had monastic connections, although a 766 charter says Cynewulf, king of the West Saxons, gave land to the church of St Andrew to augment the monastery by the great spring called Wielea.<sup>1</sup> King Ine was believed to have founded the Wells church in 705,<sup>2</sup> and he might have done, but this is not certain as there may have been a Christian foundation before this date. It is sometimes best to keep an open mind and not be dogmatic when the mists of time cloud the matter.

The ancient documents show that the area surrounding the spring, Wielea, was called Tidington, Cideston, Tidesbury, Tideston, not Wells.<sup>3</sup> So, was it the Wielea that gave rise to the name Wells? We do not know for certain.

Early chapels and churches, such as the one by the Wielea, were often administered by monks, as only a wealthy lord or a monastery could afford to fund resident priests.<sup>4</sup> Irish monk missionaries circulated in the area in the 600s and were at Beckery (Glastonbury) in the 400 and 500s.<sup>5</sup> However, any direct monastic influence in Wells had gone by 1090 when the cathedral canons were forced to live outside the church complex.

Until 909, Wells was in the large Diocese of Sherborne until the Diocese of Somersetshire (Wells) and its bishop Athelm 909-914 came into existence. The new bishop of Somersetshire was given some estates in the county to supply him with an income; hence he became a secular lord. However, we do not know where the bishop lived. The early bishops probably lived in one or more of their manors, such as Wedmore, Banwell or Congresbury, given by the king but sometimes reclaimed by other kings.

The new bishops of Somersetshire based their see at Wells for strategic purposes, but the Councils of London in 1075 and 1078 required bishops to move their cathedrals from villages to populated towns. This was when Sherborne, Lichfield and Selsey bishops became Salisbury, Chester and Chichester. Furthermore, Crediton, Thetford and Wells became Exeter, Lincoln and Bath. Bishop John of Tours 1088-1122 transferred his see to Bath, and Wells declined for 150 years until c.1245. Even so, there were about 12 canons at the church in Wells c.1140.

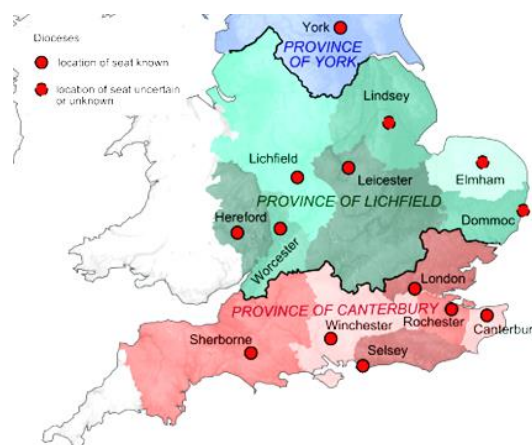


Figure 1. English Dioceses 908

<sup>1</sup> London, British Library, Lansdowne 447, f. 32v (s. xvii; incomplete). London, Society of Antiquaries, 128, f. 151r (s. xvii; incomplete). Oxford, Bodleian Library, Eng. hist. C. 241, f. 31r (s. xvi; abbreviated). Wells, DC., Liber Albus II, ff. 404v-405r (s. xiv/xv).

<sup>2</sup> W. Rodwell, *Wells Cathedral: Excavations and Structural Studies, 1978-93, Volumes 1 and 2* (London: Historic England, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> David Gary Shaw, *The Creation of a Community: The City of Wells in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 24.

<sup>4</sup> Nicholas Orme, *Going to Church in Medieval England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2021), 5-18.

<sup>5</sup> S.E. Kelly, *Charters of Malmesbury Abbey* (Oxford: OUP/British Academy, 2005), 4. Beckery was one of the earliest monastic sites in England.

The Domesday survey of 1086 recorded the heads of households, their status and slaves, the land and the livestock. The population would have been about five times more than the number of households. The status recorded villagers and freemen who were small-scale landholders, owning, on average, 30 acres of land and two oxen for ploughing. Smallholders and cottagers owned about 5 acres of land and might have had a share in the village plough teams. Slaves owned no land and belonged to the lord.



Figure 2. The Hundred of Wells?

Domesday indicates that the Hundred of Wells, which the bishop controlled, only had three places of note: Wells with 132 households, Litton with 21, and Westbury (-sub-Mendip) with 18. The Wells households consisted of 58 villagers, 47 smallholders, 27 slaves (c.525 people). Livestock: 4 cobs, 34 cattle, 40 pigs, 250 sheep, 24 goats. Also, the manor had nine water mills. Litton's households comprised 8 villagers, 7 smallholders and 6 slaves (c.81 people). The livestock were 13 cattle, 40 goats. Westbury's households comprised 6 villagers, 10 smallholders and 2 slaves (c.82 people). Livestock was 1 cob, 10 cattle, 18 pigs, and 200 sheep.

The Domesday survey indicates that the bishop of Wells was lord of over 50 thousand acres, providing an income of about £218 (over £200,00 today).

### Bishop's 14 manors before 1066

Ash [Priors], [Bishops] Lydeard, Chard, Cheddar, Chew [Magna], Evercreech, Kingsbury [Episcopi], Litnes, Milverton, Wedmore, Wellington, Wells, Westbury [-sub-Mendip], Wiveliscombe.

### Bishop's 21 manors 1086

Ash [Priors], Banwell, [Bishops] Lydeard, Chard, Chew [Magna], Combe [St Nicholas], Congresbury, Evercreech, Kingsbury [Episcopi], Litnes, Litton, Wanstrow, Wedmore, Wellington, Wells, Westbury [-sub-Mendip], Winsham, Wiveliscombe, Yatton.



Figure 3. Bishop of Wells' 21 Estates 1086

King John's 1201 charter elevated the Wells borough community by making the burgesses responsible to the king, safeguarding them from the bishop's interference.

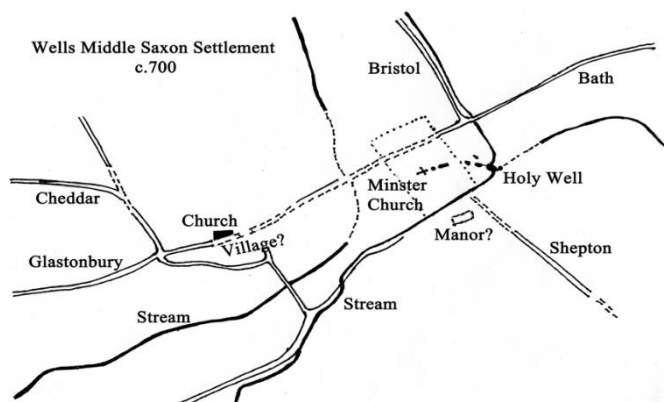
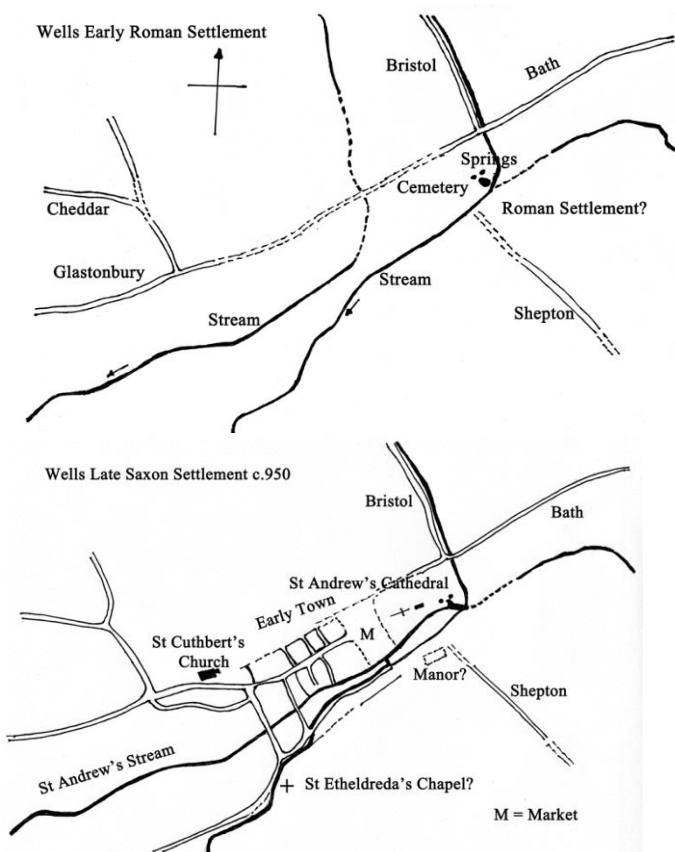


Figure 4. These diagrams are based on Warwick Rodwell's Wells Cathedral Excavations 2001

Burgesses were merchants or craftsmen who owned property in the borough and were allowed to trade freely. Becoming a burgess could be by inheritance, marriage, purchase, or gift of a borough. Wells burgesses ran the corporation and administered the civil authority.

| Sector <sup>6</sup> | Wells, 1350-1500<br>% of workforce |
|---------------------|------------------------------------|
| Cloth-making        | 26.4                               |
| Victuallers         | 19.9                               |
| Garment             | 9.2                                |
| Building            | 8.7                                |
| Leather-workers     | 7.6                                |
| Metalworkers        | 7.2                                |
| Merchants           | 6.7                                |
| Services            | 6.4                                |
| Leather-makers      | 4.4                                |
| Misc. manufacturers | 3.1                                |
| Labourers           | 0.3                                |

Bishops Robert of Lewis 1136-1166, Reginald de Bohun 1174-1191, and Savaric 1192-1205 saw the potential for trade and profit and encouraged the town of Wells to develop a market and trading facilities. Bishop Robert of Lewis granted charters extending Wells' fairs from one to three days, increasing trade and helping the village expand into a town. Bishop Reginald de Bohun's charter c.1180 set out new boundaries for the borough of Wells and allowed more buildings to be erected, increasing the wealth of Wells and its bishop and boosting employment.

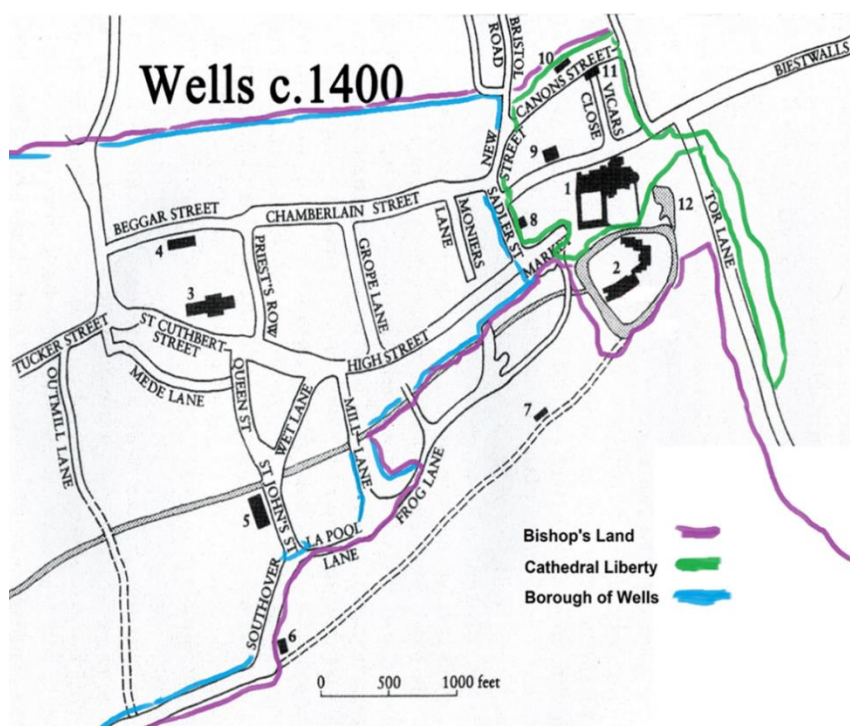
Bishop Savaric's charter of 1200 expressly set out his lordship of Wells to be 'for his profit'. By 1201 there were 19 days of fairs over the year free from tolls which developed the prosperity of Wells. The bishop's presence, his staff, and the cathedral staff significantly influenced the wealth of Wells as they were important consumers of food and materials, particularly building, textile and silversmithing supplies.

**Table 1. The Wells Workforce.**

Markets were Wells' important trading centres, allowing people to sell their excess food produce and wool, cloth, leather and gloves. Hence Tucker (fuller) Street. The Wells burgesses wanted more control over its wealth, and c.1330, negotiated to be allowed more authority over the borough by paying the bishop 100 marks (1 mark=13s 4d. 100 marks =£66 12s 5d = £55,000) per year.

1. St Andrew's Cathedral<sup>7</sup>
2. Bishop's Palace
3. St Cuthbert's Parish Church
4. Almshouse and Continuity Meeting Hall
5. Hospital of St John the Baptist
6. Chapel of St Thomas Becket
7. Bishop's Manor Barn
8. Bishop's Guildhall (obsolete)
9. The Deanery
10. The Canons' Barn
11. Vicars' Chapel
12. The Wells<sup>8</sup>

Wells had a four-way power struggle between the burgesses, the bishop, the cathedral and St Cuthbert's Church. The cathedral appointed the vicar of St Cuthbert's, but the borough and burgesses appointed the other clergy and officers, giving them some control of the parochial organisation. Other than appointing the vicar of St Cuthbert's, the cathedral influenced Wells's property. While the bishop was lord of Wells, the townspeople limited his power by selecting the reeves to oversee their responsibilities to the lord.



<sup>6</sup> Shaw, *The Creation of a Community: The City of Wells in the Middle Ages*, 67.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>8</sup> D. Watts, *Christians and Pagans in Roman Britain* (London: Routledge, 1991). Chapter 4.



Also, the bishop's control over the courts was ameliorated by the jurors being Wells burgesses. Juries did not just give verdicts; they also made enquires, received complaints and brought indictments.

The lordship of the bishop was extensive, even levying a "tolsester", the bishop's portion of every brewing provided at a low price. Also, the inhabitants of Wells had to grind their corn at one of the bishop's mills. The bishop influenced the Wells economy by owning the market and the town's fairs. This was all worth about £10 (£7,000) in 1300 and £25 (£17,000) by c.1440.

In the 1330s and 1340s, there were rebellions by the Wells burgesses against the bishop's power. One of the rebellions ended with Bishop Ralph of Shrewsbury c.1342 launching a legal case against the Wells burgesses who swore to oppose him. The bishop won the legal case, and the burgesses had to compensate him £3,000 (£2.3 million).

There were also constant problems between the townspeople and the cathedral vicars, which led to efforts being made to segregate clergy from townspeople. For example, a statute of 1338 (before Vicars Close was built) complained about the cathedral vicars and altarists who gossiped together when they should have been singing psalms; they went on hunting, fowling, and fishing expeditions, took part in dances and masques and prowled around the city by day and by night singing and shouting. Also, some vicars disguised their tonsures, carried swords, played backgammon in alehouses, and participated in competitive drinking bouts. Others kept concubines, committed adultery with married women, or met with prostitutes in the church.

From the late 1200s to the 1348 plague, the Wells population and property expanded considerably with the addition of Beggar, New and Tucker streets. The expansion increased the wealth of Bishops Ralph to Bekynton, enabling them to develop the Palace and Cathedral.

The population of Wells fell from 2,500 pre-plague to 1,802 by 1377, down 543. Also, there were about 155 clerics (1,802+155 = 1,957). The bishop's staff are not included. Cathedral staff = 77, plus 10 assistants to canons, 34 cathedral school scholars, 10 St John's hospital brothers, 14 parish staff and 10 unattached clerks. The 155 staff were essentially economically unproductive but consumed much.

During Cromwell's Commonwealth 1649-1660, the whole church system came under stress and between 1646 and 1660, the Church of England was technically dismantled, with bishops and cathedral clergy being dismissed and losing their property and positions. However, most of the property was restored under the restoration of King Charles II.<sup>9</sup>

The 1836 Act of Parliament set up the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, which took over the administration of church property, and clergy became funded centrally. However, it was only in 1860 that the 1836 Act was amended to allow the Commissioners to control all the bishops' property, at which point the bishop of Bath and Wells ceased to be lord of Wells.

Mark Hutchinson 2023

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<sup>9</sup> Andrew Foster, "What Happened in English and Welsh Parishes C.1642–62? A Research Agenda," in *Church and People in Interregnum Britain*, ed. Fiona McCall (University of London Press, 2021), 19.