

Prebends and prebendaries

We have seen how, from a Saxon king's hunting estate, Binegar and Whitchurch manors, by the gift of Edward the Confessor, came into the ownership of Wells Cathedral. After 1066, the Normans saw off any surviving Saxon manorial Thanes (lords). At that time also, there might have been 10 families subsisting on the land.

Meanwhile, Wells Cathedral lost its Bishop when John of Tours moved the Diocese to Bath in 1088. He left his nephew, another John, as Archdeacon and Provost. This Provost John decided that he, not the church, owned all of the Cathedral's land. He was not a nice man.

Life went on, much in this way, through the reigns of William II, Henry I and Stephen. Then came Henry II, crowned in 1154, the first of the great Plantagenet dynasty. Not only King of England, Henry was Count of Anjou, Count of Maine, Duke of Normandy, Duke of Aquitaine and Count of Nantes.

Throughout Stephen's reign and well into Henry's, the Bishop of Bath was Robert of Lewes (1136-66). Such was the job of a Bishop then that he found himself defending Bath against Robert Fitzroy, Earl of Gloucester who had risen in revolt against King Stephen. He captured Geoffrey Talbot, one of the Earl's main men. With a promise of safe conduct, the Bishop went out to parley but was captured and held hostage. You thought you lived in exciting times?

Robert was a great Bishop and the one who started the restoration of Wells. He also reorganised the running of the diocese. In a Charter of 1140, he created the Dean and Chapter of Wells in the way that you can still see in the Chapter House at Wells Cathedral.

The Charter says that the Church suffered intolerable oppression from the provosts (the dastardly John and others). It sets aside much property for the foundation of the Chapter. The Charter lists *Woky*, *Lutthana* (Litton) *Dultingehot* (Doulting) and *Chellechot* (Chilcot). Between Litton and Doulting, it lists *Withechirch*.

All these places became *Prebends* and the income from these lands supported a *Prebendary* who sat with the Bishop as part of the Wells Chapter. Binegar and Whitchurch Manors became one such Prebend.

Later documents link Withechirch with Binegar as "Benagre and Whitchurch" and the Prebendary of Whitchurch presented the Vicar of Binegar for appointment.

When you next visit Wells Cathedral, go to the Chapter House and look at the seat just to the right of the Bishop. Look up and you will see the title "Whitchurch". Your ancestors supported the man who sat in that place running Wells Cathedral.



Early on, we find Thomas, Stephen and William de Tornaco. They and Binegar changed the religious Canon Law!

Pope Alexander III wrote to the Dean and Chapter of Wells of a complaint from one Master Eustace. Bishop Robert appointed Eustace as a Canon promising him a prebend when one fell vacant but until then a pension of 40 shillings a year.

The Bishop died and a prebend for Eustace duly fell vacant. King Henry II, however, gave the prebend – Whitchurch – to Thomas de Tornaco, his clerk. Then he gave Thomas another prebend by virtue of which he also became Archdeacon. This led the Pope to change Canon Law and declare that no person might hold two prebends at one time.

Thomas was smart and, though it was not his to bestow, he gave Whitchurch Prebend to his brother, Stephen. In 1190, there is a record of Thomas and Stephen acting together to grant a watercourse to Roger de Palton in exchange for land in Wells. Stephen later presents a priest to the benefice of Binegar.

More than likely, this priest was Rector William de Tornaco. Later, he attached himself to Archdeacon Hugh (another relative) who became Bishop of Lincoln in 1209. William prospered and was Archdeacon at Stow then at Lincoln becoming Dean in 1223. A decade later, he fell out with the next Bishop, Robert Grosseteste. The Bishop began Deanery "visitations" - unheard of - and William denied the Bishop's right to inspect. Eventually William lost and, in 1239, Grosseteste deprived him of his post and William spent his final years as a humble monk at South Park Monastery.

Meanwhile, Thomas, a favourite at Henry's Court, lived high off the hog. He ran up huge debts – £21 by 1171, which he managed to settle only in 1179. Despite this, he kept his influence and we find him all over England witnessing the King's charters and being his emissary at the coronation of the young French King in Rouen.

This was the time when Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury was murdered. Pope Alexander III humbled Henry II for this deed and canonised Thomas Becket in 1173.

And what of Eustace? He never got his prebend and history does not record his fate.

A century later, in 1292, the Prebend was valued at 12 marks (£8) and Binegar Rectory at 7 marks. The Prebendary today would have the status of someone earning a good six-figure salary. High status indeed.