

Absentee Rectors and Prebendaries

John Blew, Rector 1401-08, spent little time in Binegar. He was an *absentee*. He did nothing wrong. He had the Bishop's permission to be away. He was not, though, caring for the souls of his parishioners.

The next century saw rectors appointed who were never likely to inflict themselves *in person* on their parishioners: John Marschall, Roger Bradeway, Thomas Darby, John Jolyf, John Bryan and Thomas Richardson. History records little except that they swapped this parish for that one and notched up the livings of more than one benefice, a practice known as *pluralism*.

All this would come back to haunt the Church.

Meanwhile, the Church offered a young man with talent and good luck, unrivalled prospects of advancement. It was also true that, if a priest was absent, it was because he had important administrative or judicial work for some master, either ecclesiastical or lay. For such work, remuneration tended to comprise more than one benefice.



We have seen how some Whitchurch prebendaries rose to the highest Offices of State through *absentee pluralism*. Henry V appointed Richard de Courtenay Treasurer of the Royal Household. Henry de Bracton, from humble Devonshire origins, became a great lawyer, his legal tome said to be "the crown and flower of English jurisprudence" and quoted over the entrance to Harvard University Law School's library.

Rectors also achieved prominence. John Blew's successor, Sire Stephen Payn, was Chaplain and Almoner to King Henry V.

Most 'non-residents' held responsible offices that required them to be away. If they drew their living from the fruits of a parish church, well, their work was necessary for the good order of the Church no less than of the State and society in general. Such a way of remuneration bears witness both to the feudal origin of the *benefice* and to the intricate relationship of church, society and government that had

developed over the centuries and, unsuspected, was on the verge of change.

You would still wonder, though, who did care for parishioners' souls when no priest was resident? More, what did parishioners expect of their priest back in the 1400s?