

Prebendary John Claymonde – a life in fateful years

1509 was a fateful year. On Friday 11 May, they buried Henry VII in Westminster Abbey. He was the first Tudor monarch.

His son became King and, on Monday 11 June, Henry quietly married his brother's widow, Catherine of Aragon. Sunday 24 June was the real celebration – the coronation of King Henry VIII and Queen Catherine.

On Sunday 1 December, the Bishop of Bath & Wells, Cardinal Adriano Castellesi, no less, admitted Master John Claymonde to the Chapter of Wells Cathedral. He became Whitchurch Prebendary, the last so honoured before the Reformation.

It was not until 10 September 1510 that he appeared in person to take his place in the Chapter House. He was a lawyer with more than one 'living' from the Church and spent much of his time in Lincoln.

He was then both an absentee and a pluralist (income of many benefices). As we have seen, these practices had already made the church unpopular. They were about to return to bite more than its ankle.

Added to that, there had been dissent in the church for a century. John Wycliffe from Oxford University pressed for reform and translated the bible into English for all to read. Our Whitchurch Prebendary (1375-1410), Richard Courtenay, supported Wycliffe's radical views.

In 1517, Martin Luther nailed his *Ninety-five Theses* to the door of the Castle Church at Wittenburg setting off the Protestant Reformation.

Curiously, as things turned out, King Henry VIII published an anti-Luther tract in 1521, calling him "a venomous serpent, a pernicious plague, infernal wolf, an infectious soul, a detestable trumpeter of pride, calumnies and schism". It takes one to know one, I guess. Still, Pope Leo X made Henry *Defender of the Faith*, a title still used.

Henry's support for the Catholic Church was not to last and, in 1525, aged 40 and with no male heir, Henry's eye lit on Anne Boleyn. Over the next eight, tumultuous years, Henry failed to secure a divorce from Queen Catherine and that led him to create his own schism with Rome.

You would wonder what John Claymonde made of it all.

He was an important man. Born in Lincoln, he was educated at Magdalen College becoming a fellow then president in 1507. He was ordained in 1499 and became Doctor of Divinity in 1510. In 1509, he became our Prebendary.

He collected benefices from Durham to Somerset, becoming very rich. His good fortune was often via his friendship with Bishop Richard Fox. Fox founded Corpus Christi College, Oxford and persuaded Claymonde to leave Magdalen and become first president of his new college.

Like many Prebendaries, he was often absent but he did present both John Able in 1513 and John Dun in 1523 to be Binegar Rectors.

He certainly moved in high circles. He counted Erasmus – the greatest scholar of the *Northern Renaissance* – as a friend. Indeed, Erasmus dedicated an edition of *Fortune and Providence* to Claymonde.

Erasmus also reported that Claymonde was great friends with Cuthbert Tunstall, Richard Pace and Sir Thomas More.

Tunstall was Prince-Bishop of Durham during the reigns of Henry, Edward, Mary and Elizabeth. He advised Catherine during her divorce from Henry. Pace was Cardinal Wolsey's main diplomat (spy).

Sir Thomas More was a lawyer, statesman, author, social philosopher, Renaissance humanist and – well – *Saint*. More refused to take the *Oath of Supremacy* to the King for which he was beheaded for treason dying, in his own words, "the King's good servant and God's first".

From 1518-23, Cardinal Wolsey was Bishop of Bath & Wells. As his successor, John Clerk, was more the King's man than the Pope's, Claymonde must have had an idea what was coming.

Though the *Act of Supremacy* that appointed Henry VIII Supreme Head of the Church of England passed into law in 1534, it was not until 1537 that the Reformation began to affect the Diocese of Bath & Wells.

From the company he kept – More, Tunstall and Erasmus – we can guess he did not approve of reformation or what the King was doing. It was perhaps a blessing, then, that he died in 1537.