

Bad Bishop Barlow and his bountiful bequest

For Wells Cathedral, the Reformation began quietly, though the Crown did seize Bath Priory in 1539. Real change started on the death of Henry VIII and the accession the boy-king, Edward VI, in 1547.



For the next two years, the boy's uncle, the Duke of Somerset, was Lord Protector. Edward VI only reigned for six years but was an arch-protestant and new laws soon reflected this.

In 1548, came the *Chantries Act*. It confiscated church estates to use the income for education. In the turmoil of the time, most of the money found its way into private pockets. *Plus ça change, do I hear?*

For Wells Cathedral, it was a calamity. Chantry chapels were for saying Masses for the souls of the dead to speed their journey through Purgatory to Heaven. People left money for the masses. The drop in income forced the Chapter to sell chapel furnishings, medieval memorial brasses and even lead off the roof to cope with the loss.

That same year, William Barlow became our Bishop, having schmoozed up to the Duke of Somerset by preaching against idolatry. Barlow, let us be clear, was a fierce protestant, familiar with the reformist doctrines of Martin Luther. He was keen to 'purify' the Church.

Fairly or otherwise, the diocese history has not treated him kindly. Collinson writes in 1791, "In his time great havock was made with the buildings and revenue of the church. What with selling, exchanging and spoiling, the See lost in a very few years nearly half its possessions. When Queen Mary came to the crown this Barlow fled into Germany."

On 20 May 1548, on a promise of £2,000, Barlow sold the Duke seven manors, the Bishop's Palace and other estates and profits of jurisdiction of the See. All he actually got was a miserable £400.

In fairness, it was the King, not "this Barlow", who bestowed "extravagant favours" on the Duke, "in opposition to the avowed will of his people". Nor did the King's favours come "out of his private purse, or exchequer, nor out of his manors or castles or such other funds as would publicly have been little felt . . . but out of the lands and possessions of this bishoprick".

Barlow was not popular with the Wells Chapter but worse was to come.

Edward Seymour, Duke of Somerset, Lord Protector of Edward VI rose to prominence as a warrior. He was a protestant but a moderate one.

William Barlow rose to be Bishop of Bath and Wells by currying Seymour's favour. He was a radical, railing against Church iniquities. He campaigned against relics, pilgrimages and saint-worship and warred with his own church authorities wherever he went.

When Barlow sold valuable manors and estates to Seymour for £400, the Lord Protector could not believe his luck. Collinson puts it like this, "The Court, perceiving the Bishop so easy wrought on, and so complacent in giving up the revenues of his church, tried him still farther."

Barlow obliged with a further huge portion of the Cathedral's wealth including ten more manors and the Minories in London. It included, "all and singular, the messuages, lands, tenements, mills, meadows, pastures, woods, underwoods, commons, wastes, heaths, marshes, waters, fisheries, rents, reversions, services, court-leet, view of frank-pledge, parks, warrens and avowdsons of churches and all other possessions and hereditaments". Is that clear enough?

In return, the Crown gave back some parishes near Glastonbury and Castle Cary that it had "taken" barely a decade before when it dissolved the Abbey and Bath Priory. Collinson: "all a very insufficient consideration for the lands thus shamefully dismembered from the bishoprick".

Though powerful, Seymour had enemies and was unlucky enough to be in office during a rebellion. In Tudor years, many farmers changed from growing crops to raising sheep. They enclosed common land, depriving local people of it. Rebellion followed. The nobility, led by his enemies (including his brother), blamed Seymour for the social unrest.

In 1550, they forced Seymour out and took away his lands. His handling of the rebellion, though, had made him a people's hero and so his enemies feared executing him. On 22 January 1552, though, Edward VI wrote in his diary, "The Duke of Somerset had his head cut off on Tower Hill between eight and nine in the morning". What callous days they were. He was writing about his mother's brother.

In Wells, William Barlow was fast becoming the most reviled Bishop ever. In five years, and for a song, he gave up half the Cathedral's wealth to Tudor kleptocrats, the model for today's Russian oligarchs. Mind you, the Barlows were not beneath grabbing their share of church assets at knockdown prices.

Having sold his Palace, Barlow lodged in the Deanery and was in instant dispute with the Dean. Dean Goodman had annexed Wiveliscombe Prebend for himself. The Manor there was a favourite of Bishops, not least with Bishop Ralph who had sheltered there from the Black Death in 1348.

Barlow promptly deprived Goodman of the Prebend. In response, the Dean accused Barlow of *Praemunire* – illegally using Papal authority to grab an asset that was only in the King's gift. How Barlow must have smarted, he, the arch protestant, accused of a catholic crime! The Dean won the case! That meant that Barlow had to seek a Royal pardon for his crime. When Edward VI duly obliged, Barlow relieved the Dean of Wiveliscombe Manor!

Barlow may have had hidden motives, which paint him in a rather better light. In 1535, as Prior of Bisham, Berkshire, he secretly married Agatha Wellesbourne, long before it became legal in 1547. By then Agatha had borne most of their twelve children. The 1547 change in the law, though, allowed Barlow to bring his episcopal family out, so to speak, of the closet.

There were five girls and *each girl married a bishop* – an achievement in an age that shunned illegitimate priestly offspring. These women were crucial in creating a later honourable role for clergymen's wives.

Back in Wells, Barlow presided over the erection of a pulpit in the nave and whitewashing the biblical scenes and saints from the interior.

Then, in 1553, King Edward VI died. With Queen Mary, the pendulum swung violently back to Catholicism. They took Barlow to the Tower and, for being married, forced him to resign his bishopric. In 1555, he recanted his protestant beliefs and they set him free.

He immediately fled to the Continent finding refuge with the Duchess of Suffolk. On his wife's monument, it states that Agatha, 'most faithful unto her husband both in prosperity and adversity became a companion with him for the gospel's sake'. It is possible that the children accompanied their parents into exile.

In 1558, Mary died, Elizabeth came to the throne and Barlow returned home to become Bishop of Chichester. You could not make it up! He died in 1568.



A post script

On 1 August 1559, Matthew Parker was elected Archbishop of Canterbury. However, it was difficult to find the necessary four bishops willing and qualified to consecrate Parker and it was not until 19 December that they performed the ceremony. One of the four bishops was, of course, William Barlow.

Fifty years later, Jesuit Christopher Holywood alleged the consecration had been 'indecent'. The story went that they consecrated Parker with a Bible pressed to his neck in the Nag's Head, Cheapside.

If this was just a scurrilous tale, the consecration later became controversial.

It was legally valid only by virtue of royal supremacy. They relied on the *Edwardine Ordinal* of 1552 but Mary Tudor had repealed this and the Parliament of 1559 had not re-enacted it.

Matters came to a head 337 years later when the Papal Commission pronounced Anglican Orders "null and void". The 1896 Commission could not dispute that the actual laying on of hands and prayer created a 'succession' for Archbishop Parker. All four consecrators had been made bishops by men who themselves had been with the Roman Pontifical.

The Catholic Church asserted, however, that there was "defect of form and intent" and that manual transmission (the laying on of hands) was insufficient to consecrate an Archbishop. And if Parker was invalid, so was everyone else!

The Church of England rejected this and so the argument went on. . .