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NOTE AND DOCUMENT

John Wycliffe and the Prebend of Aust

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It has been known since at least 1900 that John Wycliffe the reformer held four benefices during his life: the parishes of Fillingham, Ludgershall and Lutterworth, and the prebend of Aust in the collegiate church of Westbury-on-Trym in Gloucestershire.[1] The prebend has attracted particular interest because it has seemed to jar with his reputation as a reformer and critic of failings in the Church. Not only did he hold it in tandem with a parochial benefice, and for a period two benefices, thus filling the role of a clerical pluralist, but he was found wanting in the execution of his duties. The following article aims to re-examine his tenure of the prebend with respect to its dates, its economic value, the responsibilities that it carried and the extent to which he discharged them. This allows the correction of some misunderstandings and the presentation of that part of Wycliffe's career in a more sympathetic light.

Westbury-on-Trym lies three miles or five kilometres north-west of the centre of Bristol in a district where the churches and much of the land belonged to the bishops of Worcester from Anglo-Saxon times until the Reformation.[2] One of their residences lay at Henbury nearby and they often stayed there up to the late fifteenth century. Westbury church was an ancient

WHS = Worcestershire Historical Society

[1] Hastings Rashdall, 'John Wycliffe', in L. Stephen and S. Lee (eds), *Dictionary of national biography*, xxi, London 1900; J. A. Twemlow, 'Wycliffe's preferments and university degrees', *EHR* xv (1900), 529–30.

[2] The best history of the college is to be found in A. Hamilton Thompson, 'Notes on the ecclesiastical history of the parish of Henbury', *Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society* xxxviii (1915), 99–186. The present author is preparing *Westbury-on-Trym: monastery, minster, college* (Bristol Record Society, forthcoming).

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minster, staffed since about 1100 by a body of secular clergy consisting of a dean and five canons or prebendaries who constituted a chapter with joint power over the common rights and possessions of the college. The dean and canons each had a personal prebend of revenues for their support, and the canons' prebends came to be called after places in the vicinity whence part or all of these revenues came: Aust, Godringhill, Henbury, Holley and Lawrence Weston. Some historians have assumed that the prebendaries had responsibilities for these places, in Wycliffe's case for Aust.[3] The clergy possessed rights of jurisdiction over the lands of their prebends,[4] but with rare exceptions they had no ecclesiastical duties in them.[5] The church of Aust was legally a chapel of ease to the parish church of Henbury a mile distant from Westbury. Wycliffe had no obligations as prebendary of Aust towards the chapel building, its chaplain, its worship or the pastoral care of its district, all of which belonged to the vicar of Henbury under the supervision of the whole collegiate body.[6] The religious functions of the prebendaries related primarily to the two churches that belonged to them as dean and chapter: Westbury and Henbury. This involved the maintenance of the chancels in both places and the daily services at Westbury.[7]

No systematic code of statutes had ever been made for the college, which was governed by custom reinforced by a few ordinances issued by previous bishops of Worcester. Bishop Cantilupe (1237–66) had required canons to keep residence for at least one month a year, on pain of a fine.[8] Bishop Giffard in 1293 had ordered those who did not keep residence to provide a vicar to do their duties in their absence, again with fines for non-compliance.[9] He also laid down (or confirmed) that three of the prebends (including Aust) should be held by a priest or deputed to a priest-vicar, while the other two could be held or served by a deacon and a subdeacon respectively.[10] If there were ever written descriptions of the prebendal properties and their revenues, these have disappeared and there is no full account of the subject in medieval times. A list of the possessions of an unnamed prebend in 1195 (probably

[3] See, for example, H. B. Workman, *John Wyclif: a study of the English medieval Church*, Oxford 1926, i. 163; J. H. Dahmus, 'Wyclyf was a negligent pluralist', *Speculum* xxviii (1953), 378–81; and K. B. McFarlane, *John Wycliffe and the beginnings of English nonconformity*, London 1952, 26.

[4] There is a reference to this effect in 1455: *Calendar of papal letters*, xi, London 1921, 231.

[5] The prebendary of Holley had claims to present the chaplain of Compton Greenfield in the parish: *Register of Bishop Godfrey Giffard, 1268–1301*, ed. J. W. Willis Bund (WHS, 1898–1902), 498.

[6] Thompson, 'Notes on Henbury', 117; H. J. Wilkins, *The disagreement between the dean and chapter of Westbury and the vicar of Henbury*, Bristol 1909, 11–31.

[7] Thompson, 'Notes on Henbury', 105–18.

[8] *English Episcopal Acta*, XIII: *Worcester, 1218–1268*, ed. P. M. Hoskin, London 1997, 128.

[9] Worcestershire. Record Office, Worcester, Register of William Whittlesey (b 716.093; BA 2648/4(ii)), fo. 3r; reproduced in H. J. Wilkins, *Was John Wycliffe a negligent pluralist? Also John de Trevisa, his life and work*, London 1915, 10–14, 19–22.

[10] Reg. Whittlesey, fo. 3r; Wilkins, *Was John Wycliffe?*, 12, 20.

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Godringhill), however, indicates that they consisted partly of rents from land and partly from tithes.[11] In 1535 the prebends of Aust, Henbury and Lawrence Weston were also said to comprise lands and tithes of corn and hay, but the location of these resources is not stated apart from the clues provided by the prebendal names.[12]

The principal and most often consulted source for the prebendal values is the papal taxation of 1291, which rated the annual income of the deanery and of Godringhill at £10 6*s.* 8*d.* each and that of the other four prebends (including Aust) at £6 13*s.* 4*d.* each.[13] But, as is well known, the incomes attributed to benefices in 1291 fell short of the truth.[14] In 1332 a prebendary of Godringhill was able to negotiate a pension of £20 *per annum* with his successor, which suggests that the true revenues of that prebend were well over twice the figure of 1291, in which case the same may be true for the others.[15] The next recorded valuation occurs in a list of benefices in the patronage of the bishop of Worcester dating from between 1435 and 1445, in which estimates of their revenues are given – estimates that seem to be reckonings of real value as opposed to assessments for taxation. Here the deanery is rated at £26 13*s.* 4*d.*, Godringhill at £20 and Aust at £10,[16] the latter two figures implying that there had been a slight decline in the prebendal incomes, no doubt due to a smaller number of tithe-payers after the middle of the fourteenth century. By 1535, the date of Henry VIII's *Valor ecclesiasticus*, the prebends of Westbury had been subsumed into the common funds of the college and it is not possible to make a straightforward comparison between this valuation and that of 1291, but the three prebends of Aust, Henbury and Lawrence Weston were valued together at £25 6*s.* 8*d.* which, if their prebendaries had shared the income equally, would have given each one about £8 8*s.* 10*d.*[17] These sums may have been supplemented in earlier times by a share of revenues common to all the clergy, so it is better to take the figure of 1435–45 and say that Aust was probably worth about £10 *per annum* in Wycliffe's time.

Wycliffe acquired Aust through his inclusion on a list of deserving clergy submitted to the pope by the University of Oxford for promotion to benefices. In his case a request was made for a canonry of York, but the papal administration granted it on 24 November 1362 only in respect of a canonry of Westbury, with reservation of a prebend when one became

[11] Worcestershire Record Office, Register of Godfrey Giffard (b 716.093; BA 2648/1(i)), fo. 278r; reproduced in *Papsturkunden in England*, ed. W. Holtzmann, Berlin 1930–52, ii. 466–7.

[12] *Valor ecclesiasticus tempore Henrici VIII*, ed. J. Caley, London 1810–34, ii. 434.

[13] *Taxatio ecclesiastica Angliae et Walliae auctoritate papae Nicholai IV, circa 1291*, ed. S. Ayscough and J. Caley, London 1802, 220.

[14] Rose Graham, *English ecclesiastical studies*, London 1929, 271–301.

[15] Worcester Cathedral Library, WCM A 5, i, fo. 151r; *The Liber Albus of the priory of Worcester, parts 1 and 2*, ed. J. M. Wilson (WHS, 1919), 90, no. 1228.

[16] BL, Cotton Charter IV.11.B.

[17] *Valor ecclesiasticus*, ii. 433–4.

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vacant.[18] This meant that Wycliffe became a titular canon immediately but had to wait for a prebend to become available and for formal admission to it by the bishop before he could draw on its revenues and assume its rights and responsibilities. It is not known when the vacancy occurred because the bishops' registers were not uniformly efficient in recording admissions to benefices. Wycliffe's last known predecessor as prebendary of Aust was Henry de Cokham or Cookham, who died between 1365 and 1370, and there is no evidence as to when he gave up the post.[19] It can only be said that Wycliffe was holding the prebend in June 1366.[20] A cleric who acquired a benefice through a papal grant was liable to pay annates to the papal treasury – a sum equal to one year's income of the prebend as valued in the taxation of 1291. Wycliffe's liability to pay the sum of £6 13*s*. 4*d*. was duly noted in the accounts of the papal tax collector in England and the sum was followed by a repetition of the amount, probably signifying that it had been paid. There is no indication that it had not been.[21]

This brings us to the principal document relating to Wycliffe's tenure of the prebend: the inquiry of William Whittlesey, bishop of Worcester, into the alleged neglect of duties by the prebendaries of Westbury. The documents relating to this inquiry are recorded in Whittlesey's episcopal register and were printed in 1915 by H. J. Wilkins, vicar of Westbury, a careful student of that church's history.[22] There are three documents. The first, dated in Wilkins's edition as 16 April [16 Kal. May] 1366, is a letter from Whittlesey to the dean of Westbury saying that he had heard that some of the canons and prebendaries neither kept residence at the church nor appointed vicars to replace them. He included a copy of Bishop Giffard's statute of 1293 to the effect that any prebendary who failed to find a vicar for half a year was to be suspended from office, and if for a whole year to be excommunicated. Those who failed were also to be fined at the rate of four marks (£2 13*s*. 4*d*.) in the case of a priest vicar, £2 in that of a deacon vicar, and £1 6*s*. 8*d*. in that of a subdeacon vicar.[23] Whittlesey then ordered the dean, Richard de Cornwayle,

[18] Twemlow, 'Wycliffe's preferments', 529–30; *Calendar of papal petitions*, i, London 1897, 390.

[19] A. B. Emden, *A biographical register of the University of Oxford to A.D. 1500*, Oxford 1957–9, i. 457, to be supplemented by J. Le Neve, *Fasti ecclesiae Anglicanae, 1300–1541*, VII: *Chichester diocese*, ed. Joyce M. Horn, London 1964, 8.

[20] The reason for proposing this date will emerge from the discussion that follows.

[21] *Accounts rendered by papal collectors in England, 1317–1378*, ed. W. E. Lunt and E. B. Graves, Philadelphia 1968, 494. The suggestion that Wycliffe owed £29 5*s*. 8*d*. (Anne Hudson and Anthony Kenny in *ODNB*), is a misunderstanding; that sum is a total of several assessments or payments, including Wycliffe's.

[22] Wilkins, *Was John Wycliffe?*, 10–18 (Eng. trans.), 18–26 (Latin).

[23] Giffard also talks of 'newly added' prebendaries being allowed a year in which to find a vicar, but this related to a scheme of his to increase the number of prebends, and did not apply to the five original prebendaries although it may, perhaps, have been misinterpreted to do so by Wycliffe's time.

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to report the names of the prebendaries who were absent without appointing vicars, the length of time that this had been going on, and whether they had taken an oath to keep the statutes and regulations of the Church. The dean replied accordingly on 27 June, in the second document of the three, which contains a report on each canon. In the case of Wycliffe, the dean informed the bishop (in rather poor Latin) that

> Also Master John Wynkele [*sic*], canon and prebendary in the same [church], whom I inducted as dean into corporal possession of the same prebend, who also [took] a corporal oath to observe the statutes and customs and observances of the same collegiate church, who ought to provide a chaplain in the same according to the form expressed above, and has altogether maintained none but has wholly withdrawn for one whole year last past, nor has he made any residence from the time of his arrival.[24]

Immediately after receiving this letter, Whittlesey (who was staying at his manor of Alvechurch, Worcs.) issued the third document on 28 June, ordering the dean to cite all the canons who were non-resident and at fault in not providing vicars to appear before the bishop within twenty days to show cause why they should not face the sequestration of their prebends.

The first observation to be made concerns the year when this took place. The transcript of the documents in the register of Bishop Whittlesey indeed gives the year date as 1366, and this has been repeated by all Wycliffe's recent biographers.[25] But Wilkins also noted the fact (although he did not emphasise or explore it) that the calendar date included the statement that it was the fourth year of the bishop's translation. Whittlesey, who had previously been bishop of Rochester, was provided to the see of Worcester on 6 March 1364,[26] so that his fourth year began on 6 March 1367, not 1366. This confusion is not untypical of the poor text of the dean's document, but the date can be settled by two other pieces of evidence. One is that the dean's information stretched back for five years, and Cornwayle had been admitted as dean in July 1362. The other is the presence of William de Hindeley as one of the five prebendaries mentioned in the report. He acquired the prebend of Henbury only on 22 September 1366, by exchange with John de Swynlegh in return for a prebend of St Paul's Cathedral and a prebend of

[24] 'Item magister Johannes Wynkele canonicus et prebendarius in eadem quem ego decanus induxi in corporalem possessionem eiusdem prebende, qui eciam iuramentum corporale de obseruando statuta et consuetudines ac obseruaciones eiusdem ecclesie colleg[iate] qui debuit exhibuisse vnum capellanum in eadem iuxta formam superius expressatam, et nullum penitus exhibuit sed omnino subtraxit per vnum annum integrum vltimo elapsum nec aliquam fecit residenciam a tempore assecucionis sue': Reg. Whittlesey, fo. 3v; Wilkins, *Was John Wycliffe?*, 16–17, 24.

[25] Wilkins, *Was John Wycliffe?*, 27; Workman, *John Wyclif*, i. 159; McFarlane, *John Wycliffe*, 26; Emden, *Biographical register*, iii. 2104; Hudson and Kenney in *ODNB*.

[26] C. Eubel, *Hierarchia catholica medii aevi*, Münster 1897–1910, i. 561

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St Mary-by-the-Castle, Leicester.[27] The date of the three documents was therefore definitely 1367 (perhaps a minim has been omitted from a date that should have ended 'lxvij'), and on that basis it can be stated that Wycliffe was in possession of his prebend by June 1366.

He was not the only cleric to be found wanting in the dean's report. In the latter's view, John de Bryan, the senior prebendary (admitted in 1349), had not kept residence or appointed a vicar for the last four years, while Roger de Otery, the next senior (admitted in 1361), had been deficient in both respects for the last five. Richard Michel, who had acquired a prebend by exchange in November 1362, had never kept residence and had failed to maintain a vicar for the previous year. Wycliffe was the next in seniority, and only Hindeley, the most recent arrival, was judged to be free of blame. He had not resided during the nine months of his tenure, but he had maintained a vicar for the last six months. Bryan and Otery were therefore the worst offenders, and Michel and Wycliffe, although non-resident since their admission, were at fault only in not having found a vicar for the previous year. The dean was not specific about the date of Wycliffe's arrival at the college. If it were in June 1366, he overran the period of grace to find a vicar by six months; if it were earlier he had maintained a vicar up to that date and then failed to do so. One thing that he had achieved was to go to Westbury in person to be inducted by the dean and to take an oath to observe the statutes and customs of the Church. Neither Michel nor Hindeley had been inducted in person – they had been represented by proctors – while Bryan and Otery had been admitted too far back for the dean to know what had been done. It is probable that Wycliffe was unusual in coming to be inducted, since most of the fourteenth-century prebendaries had little connection with Westbury and many acquired their prebends by exchange and held them for relatively brief periods before exchanging them again for other benefices.

The sequel to Whittlesey's enquiry appears to have been the issue of an undated document in his register, which ordered the sequestration of the revenues of the prebends of Westbury until the deficiencies in their holders' obligations had been met – a relatively mild penalty.[28] The rebuke must have had its effect without further measures, since all the prebendaries were still in office in October 1368 when the bishop was translated to Canterbury, except for Hindeley who had exchanged with another cleric. Wycliffe is recorded as holding his prebend on 28 January 1371 when Pope Gregory XI granted him a right to a prebend of Lincoln Cathedral on condition that he resigned from Westbury when he secured it, and on 26 December 1373 when the pope agreed to change the condition and allow him to keep Westbury along with

[27] *Registrum Simonis de Sudbiria, diocesis Londoniensis*, ed. R. C. Fowler (Canterbury and York Society, xxxiv, xxxviii, 1927–38), i. 251–2; ii. 153.

[28] Reg. Whittlesey, fo. 11r-v; Wilkins, *Was John Wycliffe?*, 43–4 (Eng. trans.), 44–6 (Latin).

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the Lincoln prebend.[29] Instead, a threat arose from another direction. On 6 November 1375 Wycliffe took the precaution of obtaining a royal ratification of his possession of the prebend.[30] The motive for this becomes manifest when we read that, twelve days later, his prebend was granted by the king to a certain Robert de Faryngton.[31] There may have been doubts about the legitimacy of Wycliffe's tenure of Aust. The entry about his annates in the accounts of the papal tax collector, Arnald Garnerii (1371–9), states that 'It is said that he never had confirmation from the Lord Gregory [i.e. the current pope]. However he possessed it before his promotion, from the time of the Lord Urban [the previous pope].'[32] Gregory's promise of the prebend of Lincoln on condition of resigning Westbury, although subsequently amended, may have been another factor. Wycliffe was becoming unpopular in some circles by 1375, so it is not impossible that people who disliked him persuaded the king's officials that the prebend was available for a fresh royal appointment. Nevertheless conflicting grants of this kind were not unknown in the late fourteenth century, and other prebendaries of Westbury experienced similar grants to, and claims by, rival contenders. The Faryngton grant must have caused trouble for Wycliffe, but he was able to take effective countermeasures since the grant was revoked on 22 December 1376 at the instance of his patron, John of Gaunt.[33] Almost certainly he continued to hold the prebend until he died on 31 December 1384, because its next known holder, Richard de la Felde, was nominated by Richard II on 31 May 1384 to have the first vacant canonry and prebend of Westbury and must have gained it after Wycliffe's death.[34]

The results of this reinvestigation can be summarised. The Whittlesey enquiry should be redated to 1367. The prebend of Aust was a little more valuable to Wycliffe than has been recognised. Bruce McFarlane assumed that it would not have left a surplus after paying a vicar, although he conceded that the valuation of 1291 was likely to be underestimated.[35] Bishop Giffard appears to have envisaged the annual wages of a priest-vicar as £2 13*s.* 4*d.*,[36] but in 1362 parliament raised the remuneration of parish chaplains to £4[37] and, for what it is worth, Wycliffe's fellow prebendary John de Bryan claimed in 1366 that he paid £5 to his vicar at Westbury.[38]

[29] M. E. H. Lloyd, 'John Wyclif and the prebend of Lincoln', *EHR* lxi (1946), 388–94; *Calendar of papal registers*, iv, London 1902, 193.

[30] *Calendar of patent rolls, 1374–7*, London 1916, 121.

[31] Ibid. 195.

[32] *Accounts rendered by papal collectors*, 494.

[33] *Calendar of patent rolls, 1374–7*, 393.

[34] *Calendar of patent rolls, 1381–5*, London 1898, 408; *A calendar of the register of Henry Wakefield, bishop of Worcester, 1375–95*, ed. W. P. Marett (WHS n.s. vii, 1972), 124.

[35] McFarlane, *John Wycliffe*, 26.

[36] Reg. Whittlesey, fo. 3r.

[37] *The statutes of the realm, from Magna Carta to the end of the reign of Queen Anne*, ed. A. Luders and others, London 1810–28, i. 373–4.

[38] *Registrum Simonis de Langham, Cantuariensis archiepiscopi*, ed. A. C. Wood (Canterbury and York Society lii, 1956), 55.

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Employing an agent to collect one's emoluments would have been a further expense and there might have been charges on the prebendaries to maintain the buildings for which they were responsible, unless this was met from a common fund. But in principle, once he had paid off his papal annates and met his other expenses including a vicar, Wycliffe would have enjoyed a net profit from the prebend although not a very large one: perhaps about £3 *per annum*. His occupation of the benefice was legitimate in canon law throughout his period of tenure. He came in person to be inducted, he seems to have paid the papal tax he incurred and he was careful to obtain papal approval of the benefices he intended to hold. His non-residence was in order with the traditions of the college tolerated by the bishops of Worcester, and he can be found guilty only of not maintaining a chaplain for the year 1366–7. Since McFarlane's view that Wycliffe could not afford to do so is probably incorrect, there is more strength in Wilkins's argument of 1915 that it would have been hard to recruit a chaplain in the 1360s when the decline in the number of non-beneficed clergy after the Black Death of 1348–9 was exacerbated by the second epidemic of plague in 1362.[39]

Wycliffe certainly bore the responsibility for the failure. Yet, resident in Oxford, he was at a disadvantage in looking for a priest in Gloucestershire and probably depended for the purpose on some local auxiliary who may have been ineffective or unsuccessful. The dean of Westbury bore some culpability. He had been resident for five years, yet Bryan and Otery had flouted the statutes for most of that period. Even the bishop took three years to deal with the situation. Nor was the dean much more successful in keeping order later on. Ten years after Whittlesey's intervention, the clerical poll tax of 1377 provides a further opportunity for verifying the personnel of the college. Richard de Cornwayle was still dean in that year, and the rest of the resident clergy consisted of two chaplains and two clerks. The staffing was therefore short by at least one chaplain, and although the two clerks may have represented the deacon and subdeacon prebendaries, the likelihood is that one, or both of them, was a parish clerk and that the deficiency extended to two or even three vicars among the five prebendaries.[40]

When Wycliffe came to discuss the standards and failures of clerical life in the 1370s and '80s, he gave attention to the issue of non-residence. Absence from a benefice, he argued, was permissible for the greater good of the Church, such as for the purpose of study, but a benefice must not suffer from its holder's absence. An incumbent must provide spiritual services to his people in return for the resources that they provide, in particular by appointing a deputy to do his duties.[41] By the strictest measure, Wycliffe's

[39] Wilkins, *Was John Wycliffe?*, 51–62.

[40] TNA, E 179/58/5.

[41] Wycliffe, *Tractatus de officio pastorali*, ed. G. V. Lechler, Leipzig 1863, 29–30; *De veritate sacrae scripturae*, ed. R. Buddensieg (Wyclif Society, 1905–7), iii. 37–9; *Tractatus de blasphemia*, ed. M. H. Dziewicki (Wyclif Society, 1893), 178.

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offence at Westbury fell short of his later pronouncements, but he was writing about parish benefices not canonries, and although his failure to appoint a vicar diminished the worship of a collegiate church, it did not compromise a cure of souls. In the context of his own day, Wycliffe's tenure of the prebend of Aust was largely unexceptional and unexceptionable, and even the bishop appears to have thought that his fault deserved sequestration, not deprivation. It is only when he is regarded as a paragon that the episode becomes a serious issue.

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