

Bishop Richard Fox: His Reformation and Piety

by Pat Thornhill

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Richard Fox(e) [c.1444-1528], Bishop of Winchester 1501-1528



Fig 1 Richard Foxe by an unknown English artist oil on panel, early 19th century NPG 5387

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Fox was born in Ropsley near Grantham, and educated at Magdalen College, Oxford. His degree was in Canon Law. Very little is known of his early life. However, 1483 saw Fox joining the exiled Earl of Richmond (later to be Henry VII) in France.

Close Ally of Henry VII

On the death of the Archbishop of Canterbury John Morton in 1500, both Fox (Bishop of Durham) and Langton (Bishop of Winchester) were in the running for the post, which went to Langton, and Fox filled the vacant see at Winchester in 1501. Fox's move south from his Durham episcopate once more provided the opportunity to rejoin Henry VII in London more easily, combining the roles

of Keeper of The King's Seal (since 1487) and bishop. He had previously held three bishoprics, Exeter, Bath and Wells, and Durham. He was known in royal circles, as *'the man who knows the king best'*, *'the man who minded his affairs'*. Fox was Henry VII's right-hand man, a member of the inner circle and close confidante of his king. For Fox two things were paramount, loyalty and service to his King and his God. He did not act out of greed, nor personal ambition and in politics he took the long view. His religion was important to him and he had a genuine personal piety. A man who had an eye for detail and who was always checking that everything was running smoothly. He had large administrative staffs at both Southwark and Winchester (some 200 here). He also employed suffragan bishops and able men to run his dioceses but he always had his finger on the pulse and they always reported directly to him in London.

He was a skilled diplomat but because of the importance of his work and his closeness to the king, did not carry out a lot of foreign travel. His distinguished governmental career spanned some 34 years. He constructed all the major peace treaties, alliances and commercial pacts. The Tudor marriages linking Spain, Scotland and France were arranged by him. He was called 'Military Engineer' for his fortification of Calais. Fox launched the careers of William Warham, Thomas More, John Fisher and Thomas Wolsey. He was there on the Bosworth field with Henry Tudor, christened Henry VIII and was his godfather. He was also present at his wedding, many said arranged by him.

A beautifier and adorer of churches and chantries, Fox employed some of the finest craftsmen of the day for his building works - masons, woodcarvers and glaziers from England and abroad (people that he had employed during the service to the king). He was a major architectural reformer. His expert knowledge in the architectural field took the Tudor age from *'the mediaeval into the Renaissance'* (John Speed). Most of his major building works at Winchester were completed by 1509; the presbytery wooden vault and bosses, the presbytery aisle vaults, and the reconstruction of the eastern gable, with Fox standing on a pelican on high. In addition, he commissioned the glazing of the Great East Window (plus presbytery area), with stone vaulting and the Renaissance Mortuary chests. The screens on presbytery aisles are dated 1525. His chantry chapel was completed in 1518.

Attention to Religious Matters and to his College

Henry VII died in 1509, followed by the death of his mother two months later. Fox was responsible for building the royal chantries, arranging the funerals and completing the building of royal foundations (colleges and hospitals). Always politically astute, Fox was now at the pinnacle of his career. The Venetian ambassador called him the *'Alter Rex'*. However, by 1511 Fox was starting to lose control. Wolsey was now in favour and was becoming a major force. Fox was becoming a yesterday's man and made plans for his chantry chapel and his college in Oxford. When Warham, the Archbishop of Canterbury, resigned as Lord Chancellor (to be replaced by Wolsey), Fox also decided to step down, after a distinguished governmental career spanning some 31 years. However, unlike Warham, who wanted time with his books, Fox's real work was about to begin.

Fox wrote to Wolsey, *'I am determined and between God and me, to utterly renounce the meddling (sic) with worldly matters'*. At Durham, Prince Bishop Fox had found a real calling to ecclesiastical and educational reform: advancement of high education. He had a thirst for religion and a pious love of the Eucharist. When Wolsey talked of his idea of a Reformation, Fox embraced the Idea, although in practice the two men's ideas were completely different. Unlike Wolsey, Fox was not

grasping over money or wealth. He became one of the great reforming bishops of the medieval period. He financed generously the clergy, schools, his college, scholastics for those in need of an education, and the poor and needy. Always ensuring the upkeep of the land and buildings in his dioceses, he repaired churches, church properties and windmills. Payment for such improvements came often from his own purse (at great personal cost he paid for repairs and upkeep at Hyde Abbey). He provided always, an efficient and stable administration; *'trusted and trusting, an honourable man'* wrote William Frost, his steward for most of Fox's episcopate.



Fig 2 Front Court of Corpus Christi College, Oxford

Now freer to devote himself to ecclesiastical affairs, he turned his mind to the education of the religious (such as his translation and publication of the rule of St. Benedict into English for the nuns at Winchester, as they had *'no knowledge of the Latin'*) and the building of his college, Corpus Christi, completed in 1517. It was intended by him initially to be a training college for monks but he made it instead a lay religious foundation, with *'modernity of outlook'*, for the humanities and sciences, the first such college in Oxford. Erasmus, the great humanist of the time, wrote praising the College. Fox endowed the library with over 100 of his own books, including texts in Greek. He also founded schools in Grantham, near his birthplace, and in Taunton. Henry still called him back over the next three years, to rewrite governing statutes at Windsor and sent him on a mission to calm the fears of the Venetians by writing a peace pack. He also left him to govern the country in 1522, while he was in France with Wolsey. When pressed by Wolsey to be more active in state affairs, Fox saw the need for even more work in his diocese. Fox carried out a rationalisation programme, closing small churches no longer able to support themselves. When St. Rumbold's church in Winchester was found to be in a state of ruinous repair, he united it to the much larger St. Mary Kalendar, also in the town, but allowed it to keep its wealth and church plate (unlike Wolsey who used churches' wealth to build his college in Oxford). Also, in 1527 he gave the once prosperous St. John in the Soke land and properties, which made its financial base secure. He was said to have been *'a good diocesan bishop'*, ensuring that at his death all church property was in good condition; an enormous feat and one that took several years.

He was an aggressive reformer of both clergy and laity in his diocese. Writing in 1516, he said that he had taken steps since 1501, *'to address other men's enormities and vices'*. He now launched into an unprecedented campaign against clerical laxity and corruption, by a series of visitations and reforming injunctions. Problems at Hyde Abbey were severe – drinking, socialising with friends, days spent in idleness not prayer. The monks at St. Swithun's were also guilty of *'unseemly behaviour'*. He excommunicated the vicar of Sparsholt in 1520 and was harsh on clerical vice.

The nuns at Romsey were said to be incorrigible and unrepentant. They had caused problems since Waynflete's day, some 40 years earlier. Despite all these pressing problems, he still found time to attend meetings and travelled to London and France, speaking forcefully for the clergy, despite having lost his sight by the early 1520s and, some contemporaries say, he had become profoundly deaf. (However, this seems to have been an intermittent problem.)



Fig 3 Fox's symbol on the vaulting of his chantry chapel

The medieval church was strongly focused on the sacraments, with the Eucharist being the most important. Seen as a real presence, a food for the soul; the central idea of Christ dying for our sins. Fox adopted the Pelican in her Piety as his emblem and the drawing of its life blood in order to feed its young. (He first used it when he was Bishop of Exeter.) At Winchester (and also perhaps at Southwark Abbey's Great Screen, built there by Fox in 1520) there was a spy hole in the corona of Winchester's Great Screen and from here the consecrated host was lowered in a pyx in the shape of a pelican. Fox also gave the Quire stalls to St. Cross, again with Pelican decoration. His motto was *'Est Des Gratia'* – *'Thanks are (due) to God'*, or *'I thank God'*.

Fox enhanced this devotion by giving expensive gifts of plate to his Oxford college and a gold chalice and paten, to show due reverence to the Eucharist. As president of Magdalen College, and later his own college Corpus Christi, he was *'famed for his piety and learning'*, (John Claymond). It is not surprising then, with Fox's strong devotional attitude to his religion, that his college should bear the name **'Corpus'**, coming as it does from the liturgical mystery at the essence of medieval piety. Bishop John Fisher of Ely, known as, *'the Holiest man in the kingdom'*, dedicated his book on the Eucharist to Fox, because of his great love for the sacrament. A man of charity, virtue and fidelity, Fox was completely sustained by religion.

Final Years

Fox spent his final years preaching, giving food, clothes, and money to the poor. As night and day no longer have meaning for him because of his blindness, he spent his time in prayer and meditations. In his last will he left his executors £20.00 each and asks them to sell all his worldly goods and give the money to the poor. He also stated, *'Clearly aware of the brief time and few days that remain to me.... Oh death transport me to your house'*. (He was declaring himself ready to follow the advice of Ezekiel, the prophet.) Fox died at Wolvesey, longing for death. In his will he stated that he *'seeks another heavenly one [life]. Hastening to the aforesaid city in [the] hope of entering it. This useless life is fleeting and transitory'*.

His chantry, made of Caen limestone, was newly built by 1518 and used by Fox for the mass, prayer and study for the last 10 years of his life. His transi-figure shows an emaciated naked body, lying on and partly covered by his shroud, with a crozier on his left side wrapped in a cloth; his bishop's mitre under his head and a skull by his feet, illustrating his humility and understanding of what was to come. His remains were buried under the floor of the chantry, as Fox, ever practical, would have realised that they would have obstructed the saying of mass.

An accidental discovery of Fox's tomb occurred in 1820, during repairs which required the lowering of the chantry floor. The coffin was found near to the surface with the ledger stone broken into pieces and the bishop's rings plundered. Prebendary Nott took charge of the proceedings and a new ledger stone was made, and the tomb closed again some eight days later. Writing to the President of Corpus Christi College, Nott talks of the '*sacred calm that seems to hover round the remains of your Venerable founder*'. He ends his account saying, '*I did not quit the spot until all was secured, and when the stone closed upon the good bishop's tomb. I fervently said within myself, O may my latter end be like his*'.

'*All thought Bishop Fox, to have died too soon, only one exception, who conceived him to have lived too long.*' (Fuller). Cardinal Wolsey, who had wanted Fox to resign his bishopric, and succeeded him at Winchester, found the resulting monetary aspect (much less than expected) gave him no joy. Wolsey was named as perpetual administrator, not full bishop and appointed at a much lower income.

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