

# The Life and Amazing Times of William Waynflete

by Anna Withers

Among the occupants of the chantry chapels of Winchester Cathedral, William Waynflete impresses by reason of his longevity, living as he did until the age of 87 (if he was born in 1399) and under the reigns of eight kings, four of whom died by violence. To preserve life and high office during the turbulent loyalties and internecine feuds of the Wars of the Roses was a feat indeed: one might suppose that Waynflete achieved it by studious avoidance of political prominence and controversy, but in fact nothing could be further from the truth.



Fig 1 Effigy of William of Waynflete in Winchester Cathedral

Photo: Julie Adams

He was born in Wainfleet in Lincolnshire, possibly as early as 1395. His family name was Patten, or sometimes Barbour. Henry Beaufort had become Bishop of Lincoln in 1398, and it has been suggested that he assisted the young William to study at Winchester College and then at New College, Oxford. However, there is no contemporary evidence that he studied there or indeed attended Oxford at all, other than a letter written to him in later life by the Chancellor of the University, describing Oxford as the “mother who brought [Waynflete] forth into the light of knowledge”.

He took orders as an acolyte in 1420 in the name of William Barbour, becoming a subdeacon and then deacon (this time as William Barbour, otherwise Waynflete of Spalding) in 1421, finally being ordained priest in 1426.

He seems to have been marked out early as a young man of ability and potential. He was preferred (perhaps as early as 1426) by Beaufort, who had become Bishop of Winchester in 1404, to the Mastership of St Mary Magdalen, a leper hospital on St Giles’ Hill, Winchester, and in 1429 he became Headmaster (ie teacher of Latin grammar) at Winchester College.

In July 1441 he was able to impress no less a person than the King, Henry VI, who had come to spend a few days at the College. Henry was at this time in the process of founding Eton College, in imitation of Wykeham’s establishment, and by Christmas of 1442 Waynflete was Provost of Eton, charged with the financing of the college and the completion of the necessary buildings:

by way of a Christmas gift he received a royal livery of five yards of violet cloth, and he was invited to the king's wedding to Margaret of Anjou, a clear mark of favour.

Waynflete remained Provost of Eton until 1446-7, but Henry had greater things in mind for him. When Beaufort died on April 11th 1447, the king moved with exceptional speed, instructing the Chapter at Winchester to elect "his right trustie and wel beloved Clarke and counsellour Master W Waynflete" as the new Bishop. The temporalities (ie the income of the see) were given to Waynflete on April 12th, he was elected between April 15th and 17th, and appointed by papal bull on May 10th. His consecration took place in Eton Church in July.

It might be, of course, that in preferring Waynflete in this way, Henry's chief motive was to secure the services of an able and talented man, but there is clear evidence of a close personal relationship between the two men, which was to last throughout their lives, and which was to demonstrate their friendship and loyalty in many times of crisis. Henry attended Waynflete's enthronement in the cathedral in 1449, and was deeply moved by the occasion: he "was unable to suppress the emotions of his regard in bidding him receive inthronization .... wishing that he might be longlived upon earth, and increase and profit in the way of righteousness" (Chandler). Moreover, he made Waynflete one of the executors of the "King's Will", a document setting out the king's plans for the future of Eton College, including the enlargement of Eton Church to cathedral dimensions: the Will stipulated that Waynflete was to have the final word if any disagreements arose between executors. His close relationship with Henry was emphasised again in 1453, even after the king had become insane, when Henry's son Edward was born – Waynflete baptised the boy, and according to Chandler was also one of his godfathers and later his tutor.

But Waynflete (who had by this time founded Seint Marie Maudelyn Hall, later to become Magdalen College, at Oxford) was not destined to spend a quiet life among the halls of academe or ecclesiastical affairs only. In 1450 serious unrest broke out in the shape of Cade's Rebellion, triggered off by resentment over local grievances in Kent and abuse of power among Henry VI's advisers. National debt incurred by wars with France and the loss of Normandy also fuelled the fire. At the head of 5000 Kentish rebels, Cade marched on London but was repelled by the citizens in a fierce battle on London Bridge. Cade fled but was mortally wounded while being captured, and died before he could be brought to trial. Together with Archbishop Stafford, Waynflete was sent to negotiate with the rebels at St Margaret's Church in Southwark. They were dispersed with the promise of pardons but this promise was rescinded, and they were tried by a commission which included Waynflete.

Apparently Waynflete was secure in a position of authority and influence, but in August 1450 he made an extraordinary appeal to the Pope and the Archbishop of Canterbury to assist him in thwarting an attempt to deprive him of his bishopric. The rivalries that were to develop into the Wars of the Roses had already begun to rear their heads, and this was possibly a Yorkist retaliatory move against Waynflete's role in suppressing the rebellion – the Yorkist faction was in sympathy with Cade's grievances. If so, it was unsuccessful.

In 1451 Waynflete again supported the king in a major political role: Richard Plantagenet, Duke of York, had moved openly against Henry and was marching on London at the head of an army. With three others, Waynflete was sent to negotiate terms: these were successfully agreed, and the threat averted. In 1453, when Henry succumbed to insanity, Waynflete was one of the lords who attempted to get from the king authorisation for Richard of York to rule as regent, and he played an active role in the Privy Council until the king's recovery. When the king appointed Waynflete Chancellor in 1456, Richard of York was present at the ceremony; but harmony was not to last. In 1458 the Yorkists won the Battle of Ludlow; the contemporary Paston Letters show that Waynflete was incensed against them, and in the following year he actively opposed them, presiding over a parliament which attainted the Yorkists of high treason. But this ascendancy was not to last: power swung the other way, and in 1460 Waynflete resigned his Chancellorship (just before the Battle of Northampton) and fled into hiding: Edward IV took the

throne. Henry was now a prisoner in Yorkist hands, but he stirred himself to write a letter to Pope Pius II on Waynflete's behalf testifying to the Bishop's unfailing loyalty, presumably to block Yorkist moves against him, although in fact the Bishop remained secure in his see under the new regime.

Waynflete seems to have possessed an extraordinary capacity to command the liking and respect of his opponents (or even outright enemies). In 1461 he became involved in a dispute with the cathedral's tenants of East Meon in Hampshire, who were protesting against what they considered to be the wrongful exaction of manorial services, customs and dues. They actually went so far as to kidnap him, but when they petitioned Edward IV, who was on a progress



Fig 2 Waynflete's Chantry in late afternoon sun  
Photos: Julie Adams



Fig 3 and Fig 4 Details of carving on the chantry  
(i) snail on briar rose (ii) wrestlers

through Hampshire, to support their cause, he rescued the Bishop and arrested the ringleaders. The case was eventually heard in the House of Lords, and judgement given in the Bishop's favour. In 1469 he received a full pardon as Edward IV's true and faithful subject: this does not argue any specific crime or offence but rather a general indemnity for his loyalty to the Lancastrian cause.

Yet another astonishing reversal of fortune took place in 1470, when Edward was forced to flee abroad, and Waynflete was among those who released Henry from captivity in the Tower of London. But after the Battles of Barnet and Tewkesbury the Lancastrian cause was irretrievably lost: both Henry and his son were dead. Waynflete had to purchase another full pardon, but he swore fealty to Edward's son, the ill-fated future Edward V, and was constantly at court. He had the privilege of entertaining Edward IV at Magdalen in 1481: Edward had already shown favour to the bishop by allowing him the right to use masons to complete the buildings there when Edward himself needed them at Windsor, and the king's visit to the college arose "spontaneously by his [the king's] special favour" (Davis). In 1483, Edward died, and Waynflete took part in his funeral. He continued on cordial terms with Edward's successor, Richard III, entertaining him too at Magdalen when the new king made a royal progress after his coronation.

But Waynflete, now in his eighties, was to outlive Richard. In 1485 he loaned Richard £100 – uselessly - to repel the invasion of the man who was to become Henry VII. Waynflete's long involvement in national affairs was now drawing to its close: he did not attend Henry's coronation, and died on August 11<sup>th</sup> 1486, apparently of heart disease.

He had made a notable and enduring contribution to English history through his interests in education and building (incidentally showing Cardinal Wolsey that educational establishments could be funded by suppressing minor monasteries). He also successfully sustained a dangerously prominent role throughout one of the most contentious periods of English national life. His default position was clearly that of a loyal Lancastrian, but when such an alignment was untenable he seems to have been pragmatist enough to work with the Yorkist rulers in the interests of stable government. Throughout his career he retained the affection and support of Henry VI, but was also able to enjoy the friendship and respect of men who should have been his bitter enemies. His long political survival, untainted by any recorded accusations of duplicity or treachery, can only be testimony to the integrity of his character, recognised by friend and foe alike.

### Sources

1. Many on-line sources were consulted in the writing of this article: most can be found mentioned in

[https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Waynflete,\\_William\\_of\\_\(DNB00\)](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Waynflete,_William_of_(DNB00))

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