

# Two Exeter Decanal Elections, 1509<sup>1</sup>

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It is well known that by the end of the Middle Ages the Crown had established effective control over appointments to high ecclesiastical office. The statutes of Provisors in the fourteenth century formally excluded papal rights of provision, and in the fifteenth century this meant in practice that the king and the pope reached an understanding by which the pope made nominal provisions to bishoprics but that he appointed those men whom the kings wished.<sup>2</sup> Next in dignity to the bishops came the holders of offices and canonries in the cathedral churches, and although the details of royal control are not always clear, it is obvious from the number of such benefices which were granted to the king's administrators, from William of Wykeham in the fourteenth century to Christopher Urswick in the sixteenth, that royal influence played a massive part in their choice.<sup>3</sup> It has been noted in the chapter of York that 'as the Middle Ages drew to a close, so too did the York chapter's ability to do more than make a formal election of a dean nominated by the Crown.'<sup>4</sup> At Wells in 1498, after the death of Dean Gunthorpe, one of the canons declared that the king wished to have the election placed in his hands, though perhaps as a sop to the chapter, it was stated that the king's intention was to nominate an existing canon, who held the grade of doctor. Possibly the king did not have his way, because the man elected, William Cousyn, after the chapter had obtained episcopal licence to do so, is described as 'master' rather than as 'doctor'. He was, however, already a canon and archdeacon of Bath.<sup>5</sup>

The pressures which were involved in the election of a dean are much more clearly revealed in proceedings at Exeter in 1509, a year in which the chapter twice were faced with a vacancy. The proceedings are fairly fully recorded in the register of bishop Hugh Oldham,<sup>6</sup> and although the register of the dean and chapter does not survive for this period, a portfolio of miscellaneous letters in the capitular archives contains both drafts and copies of correspondence from the chapter and originals received by it.<sup>7</sup> Some of these are well preserved and others are more fragmentary, but they contain sufficient material to illustrate the background to the elections, the pressures to which the chapter might be subjected and its response to

them. Because the demands of the secular power in the two cases were similar and the reactions of the chapter different, the events of the year provide an interesting and illuminating case study of relations between the Crown and an influential corporate ecclesiastical body in the pre-Reformation period. One must however guard against seeing these episodes as totally typical of early sixteenth century church life, for it must be remembered that Exeter, with a higher proportion of residentiaries among its canons than any other English cathedral, was unusual, and that this may have given the chapter a stronger sense of its corporate identity than that possessed by any other.<sup>8</sup>

The first election was necessitated by the death of dean Edward Willoughby on 23 November 1508, after some seven years in the post.<sup>9</sup> He may possibly have been incapacitated for some time before his death, because, when on 14 October the bishop admitted William Glover to the perpetual vicarage of Colyton, which was in the chapter's patronage, the presentation to him was made by the president and chapter of the cathedral rather than by the dean and chapter. On 1 November the same patrons presented a candidate to the bishop for admission to the vicarage of Thorverton.<sup>10</sup> An alternative explanation for Willoughby's absence could have been that he was resident outside the diocese, because he held a number of other benefices, including prebends at Salisbury, Shaftesbury and Windsor. The explanation that his non-participation in a capitular act of patronage was due to ill health is however supported by the fact that three days before his death the king wrote to the chapter asking them to defer the election until his pleasure was known – clearly his early demise was expected. A copy of the chapter's reply, dated 30 November, shows that this had been received on the previous day, nine days after it was written. A letter from the king to the bishop had, however, reached Oldham more quickly for he informed the chapter of the king's wishes on Sunday 26 November. Possibly this explains why the messenger bearing the royal letter to the chapter does not appear to have shown any great sense of urgency.<sup>11</sup>

The collation of a prebend in the cathedral to Thomas Hobbys on 14 January 1509<sup>12</sup> was a necessary preliminary to his subsequent election as dean, because, as the chapter claimed in the course of the later election, the statutes of the cathedral required that the dean should be chosen from existing prebendaries.<sup>13</sup> The first meeting of the chapter in the election proceedings was held on 22 January, under the presidency of the precentor, John Veysey, the senior capitular dignitary while the deanery was vacant. Seven other persons were present, the treasurer Thomas Austell, the archdeacons of Exeter

and Barnstaple, Richard More and Richard Norton, the sub-dean John Tyake, and three canons, John Ryse, John London and Richard Sydnor. The date of the election was fixed for 5 February, a fortnight later.<sup>14</sup> Before that date Hobbys appointed proctors to represent his interests, the proxy being drawn up by notarial instrument on 28 January, and dated from the lower parlour in the chapel of St. Stephen within the royal palace of Westminster.<sup>15</sup> The six days time lag from the chapter meeting suggests that this appointment was made soon after Hobbys was notified of the election date; certainly other letters<sup>16</sup> show that communications between Exeter and the London area, even in winter, could take as little as four days.

By the time of the election the original eight members of the chapter had been reinforced by six others, John Fulford, the archdeacon of Totnes, three residentiary canons, Thomas Tomyow, Peter Carslegh and William Cretyng, and two non-residentiaries, Roger Sandiforth and John Chymew. The names of nine absentees are also noted in the record; these included that of Hobbys, who was, however, unanimously elected. Veysey, as president of the chapter announced the election in the vernacular, and it was subsequently confirmed by Oldham, with Veysey acting as his commissary.<sup>17</sup>

Hobbys was very much a king's man. He had been presented by the Crown to the rectory of Yarlinton, Somerset, on 13 March 1494 and instituted to the church nine days later.<sup>18</sup> He is described as a royal chaplain in 1502 and by the time of the Exeter vacancy he was already dean of two royal chapels, St. George's Windsor and St. Stephen's Westminster,<sup>19</sup> and almoner to Henry VII. Clearly the king had sought to defer the election so that Hobbys could become eligible for the deanery, and the outcome shows that the royal demand in November had had the desired results. There is no indication that he ever visited the cathedral, and certainly when Henry VII died in April he was one of the clergy present at court. In the account of the funeral there are references to payments being made by him and by the under-almoner, he headed the list of king's chaplains to whom a livery was given for the funeral, a list in which the name of Mr. Wolsey appears in a lowly eighth place, and on the Saturday of the funeral he was one of those who celebrated mass for the king.<sup>20</sup>

His presence at court was not necessarily to the disadvantage of the chapter, because he was well placed to act on its behalf, and he may well have been responsible for securing the grant of a pardon (though there is no indication for what this was) to him as dean and to the chapter of Exeter on 4 May.<sup>21</sup> Possibly a letter from Veysey, then in London and dated 1 June, to the chapter may belong to this summer, although no year is indicated; it also refers to a pardon and mentions

the dean, by office though not by name, as being at Windsor.<sup>22</sup> Significantly when Hobbys died, he was buried at Windsor. The precise date of his death is not certain; Emden, in the *Biographical Register*, gives it as September 1509,<sup>23</sup> but the earliest reference to him being deceased is in the grant of one of his vacant offices on 22 October.<sup>24</sup>

The second election was less protracted than the first. In response to a petition from the president and chapter, bishop Oldham, then at Crewkerne, granted a licence to hold an election on 26 October.<sup>25</sup> Seven available members of the chapter met two days later, headed by the archdeacon of Exeter, Richard More, *protunc presidens capituli*. Besides More himself, those present were the three other archdeacons of the diocese, Thomas Harrys of Cornwall, John Fulford of Totnes and Richard Norton of Barnstaple, the sub-dean John Tyake, and two residentiaries, Thomas Tomyow and Peter Carslegh. The election was fixed for 8 November, eleven days later, and letters were sent out summoning the absenees to attend.<sup>26</sup> When the chapter met for the election, it was reinforced by Veysey, Austell, two residentiaries, London and Sydnor, and two non-residentiaries, Bernard Oldham and the newly appointed Richard Tollet, who had been presented to a prebend on 29 October. Veysey presided, presumably of right as there is no *protunc* in the description of him. Nine absentee canons were represented by proxies, drawn from those who were present, although the record does not note who acted on behalf of Christopher Urswick.<sup>27</sup> Only two canons do not appear to have been represented, John Smith and Christopher Middleton.<sup>28</sup> After the licence for the election had been read, the canons with one voice (apart from the president's), 'as if inspired by the Holy Spirit', chose Veysey as dean.<sup>29</sup>

This account, as derived hitherto from the bishop's register, leaves the impression of a free and uncontentious election, from which the lay power had stood aside. Letters in the chapter archives show, however, that this was not the case, and that the Crown had again hoped to secure the benefice for one of its servants. A letter from the king to the bishop, dated at Greenwich on 28 October, referred to the vacancy in the deanery, and recommended the Master of the Rolls, John Yonge, to him, stating that other letters had been sent to the chapter to this effect.<sup>30</sup> Apart from a prebend in the collegiate church of St. Probus, Cornwall, Yonge had at this time no connection with the diocese of Exeter, but he was heavily involved in public affairs, having served in various diplomatic missions overseas as well as being Master of the Rolls.<sup>31</sup> A day later Yonge himself wrote to the bishop seeking his favour.<sup>32</sup> The chapter received the king's letter on 3

November, an indication incidentally of the speed at which messages might be transmitted, even in the early winter, and replied immediately, asserting that it was laid down in the statutes of the church that no one could be elected dean unless he was first a prebendary.<sup>33</sup>

No royal reply to this survives, but the king's answer is mentioned in a very messy, and sometimes indeed unintelligible, draft in the chapter archives. Although this is too full of interlineations, omissions and deletions to be possible to print, one can ascertain from it the general drift of the chapter's response.<sup>34</sup> This refers to the receipt on 12 November of the king's letters, dated at Greenwich on 8 November.<sup>35</sup> The excuse that Yonge did not have a prebend was repeated, and it was also asserted that by the time the king's letter had been received the date of the election had been fixed. As the chapter could presumably have deferred the choice of a dean, this appears somewhat specious, as does the suggestion that once the king knew of the statutes he would not have wished to disregard them. The draft ended with the information that the election had already taken place, and various phrases seeking the king's goodwill and promising prayers for him are added below.

Yonge himself made a complaint to the chapter.<sup>36</sup> He claimed that the king's letters of recommendation had been presented to the chapter before the date of the election had been fixed, though the chronology of events outlined above shows that this was not the case – the letters had however certainly been received before the actual election day. More telling was Yonge's point that Hobbys had not held any 'breband' (*sic*) in the church at the time of his nomination, but that the election had been postponed so that he could be qualified in accordance with the statutes; Yonge suggested that he should have been given a similar opportunity.

The rapidity of the election, however, meant that these objections had come too late. The notarial record of the proceedings was received by Oldham at his manor of Clyst on 10 November, and his commission confirming it was dated two days later.<sup>37</sup> There is, however, at this stage one indication of episcopal uneasiness – on 10 November he sent letters to the succentor of the cathedral, Richard Wey, and to one of the vicars-choral, John Tregonwell, commanding them to make proclamation that anyone who wished to oppose the election should appear in the cathedral on 23 November. No such proclamation had been made when Hobbys was elected, and this action may reflect a suspicion by the bishop that some attempt might still be made to assert Yonge's claim. In fact the proceedings on 23 November passed off peacefully, the bishop's confirmation of the election being read, and Veysey being put in corporal possession of

the deanery and being led to his stall in the choir.<sup>38</sup> Whatever the king may have felt, he was not disposed to pursue the case further, and Yonge continued to receive preferment elsewhere.<sup>39</sup>

These events raise a significant historical problem, why the chapter conformed to the royal demands on the first, but not the second, occasion. There are perhaps two possible explanations for this, first, the chapter's wish to have a more active dean after having had an absentee in Hobbys, and secondly, changed political circumstances after the death of Henry VII and the accession of Henry VIII during the year. The choice of Veysey certainly indicates that the canons were happy to have at their head a man whom they knew. As precentor since May 1508,<sup>40</sup> he was already second in the chapter to the dean, and there are at least two letters dating from before his election to the deanery which show him acting as the chapter's representative to deal with legal matters in London.<sup>41</sup> He may also have had the support of bishop Oldham, because he was active in diocesan administration. After having served bishop John Arundel as vicar-general at Lichfield, he had come with the bishop to Exeter on his translation there in 1502 and served in the same role.<sup>42</sup> After Arundel's death and Oldham's succession, Veysey continued to act as vicar-general. The documents suggest that the bishop's part in the election may have been a passive one, but he certainly did not give any support to Yonge and may tacitly have welcomed the choice of Veysey. Indeed when Oldham collated a prebend to Richard Tollet on 29 October, this could have strengthened the chapter against the Crown. This was probably not his first motive; almost certainly he did so to reward one of his administrators, for Tollet, a doctor of laws, had served as vicar-general from 31 August onwards, despite being only in minor orders, being ordained acolyte on 2 June and not receiving the subdiaconate until 22 September.<sup>44</sup> The appointment, however, as can be seen from a study of the cathedral *Fasti*,<sup>45</sup> made up the number in the chapter to its full complement of twenty-four. This meant that had the election been deferred to allow Yonge to receive a prebend, it would have had to be delayed until another vacancy occurred, at some indefinite future date.

The change of king may also have given the chapter confidence to act independently. In the early months of his reign, Henry VIII made determined attempts to secure popular goodwill by attacking the agents of his father's regime, dissociating himself from its practices, and presenting the appearance of a young and benevolent ruler. It is irrelevant whether or not this image conformed to reality; what matters is that many men held this view of the new king, and possibly the chapter felt freer in November 1509 than they had done a year

earlier when they had postponed their choice to accommodate the wishes of Henry VII. Such independence was to be short-lived. On the next vacancy of the deanery, when Veysey was promoted to the bishopric in 1519, the post was to be filled by the king's secretary, Richard Pace, though there is no certain reference to him holding it until 1522. The surviving chapter act book for the 1520s, however, shows that he was never present in Exeter and that he resigned the position in favour of another royal nominee, Reginald Pole, in 1527.<sup>46</sup>

These proceedings have more than a purely local significance, for they throw light on the workings of both the early Tudor Church and the early Tudor State. The Crown certainly saw the higher positions in the Church as a means of rewarding its servants, but it was not invariably able to carry its desires into effect, nor was it prepared to overstep the legally defined limits of accepted procedures. A determined corporate body such as the Exeter chapter could shelter behind its traditions to avoid compliance with royal wishes, particularly if the king was slow in putting forward explicit demands. However seldom churchmen might assert their liberty of the Crown, they were still, if they were sufficiently determined, able to secure at least some measure of it.

## Documents

1. Exeter D. & C. MS. 3498, no. 65. Chapter of Exeter to the king (copy), 30 November 1508.

Pleasit your highnes so it is the xxix<sup>th</sup> day of this present month we receyued your most noble letters datid at your maner of Grenewiche the xx<sup>th</sup> day of the same whereby your gode grace willith theleccion of our deane of your chath' church here in excestre schuld be deferred tyll youre further pleasure knowen which we gladly schall acomplessh And to the same we were aduertised be ower Bisshop and ordenare the sonday next before the sight of your saide letters most humble besechyng your highnes in the honour of god and saint Edward your progenitour ower prime ffounder that your plesure knowen we may by the favour of your gode grace procede to fre eleccion acordyng to oure statutis as we daily do and euer schall pray for the preseruacion of your most noble estate At excestre the last day of Nouemb'

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|----------------------------|----------------------|---------------------------|
| h vij xxiiij <sup>to</sup> | suprascriptio To the | your continuall oratouris |
|                            | kyngis highnes       | the chapitour of your     |
|                            |                      | cath church of excestre   |

2. Ibid., no. 54. The king to the bishop. 28 October 1509.  
By the kyng.

Right reuerend fader in god right trust and welbeloued we grete you wele And where as the deanry of our Cathedrall church of Excestre is nowe voyde by the decesse of doctor hobbis late hauyng the same we considering that our full trusty clerc and counseillour maister John Yong keper of our recordis and rolles in our chauncery is right mete for sundry hys comendable meritis to succede unto the said dignite to the pleasyr of god and honour of our said church haue at this tyme by our other lettres desired the chapitre there to electe and prefere our said counsaillour before any other unto the said deanry Wherefore we trustyng vereyly that ye wilbe right gladde to tendre thavauncement of suche thingis as may redounde to our pleasyr desire and hertely praye you that at our contemplacion ye will endeavour yourself in suche benevolent wise that by your goode meanes our said counsaillour may be elected and promoted unto the said deanry wherby ye shall ministre unto us right thankefull pleasyr to be remembered accordingly hereaftre And of your toward mynde herein tascertaine us in writing by this berer as we trust you yeven undre oure signet at our manor of Grenewiche the xxvij<sup>ti</sup> day of Octobre

3. Ibid., no. 55. John Yonge to the bishop. 29 October 1509.

My right singulier good lord in my most herty wise I comend me unto your good lordshippe And where as it hath pleased the kyngis highnesse as his mere mocion and goodnesse by his lettres of comendacion to name me unto your lordshippe for thobteyning of the deanry of your right honourable churche of Excettour nowe beyng voide by reason of the deceasse of doctour hobbys whos soule god pardone Therefore I beseche your said lordshippe that according to the kyngis pleasyr and for the love and service that I have alwayes owen to your lordshippe to bere unto me your lafull and benevolent favour in that behalfe And in your soo doying your lordshipe shall bynde me to owe you my service to the best of my powayr duryng my lyff as god knowethe who preserue your lordship ffrom the Rollis the xxix<sup>ti</sup> day of octobre

your owne chaplein  
John Yonge

4. Ibid., no. 56. The chapter of Exeter to the king. 3 November 1509.

Pleasith your highnes we have receyvid the thrid day of nouembre your most honorable letters dated at grenwiche the xxvij<sup>th</sup> day of

October and perceyve by the same your gracious mynde is we shulde recommend and prefere yn oure eleccion to be oure deane maister doctour yong keper of the Rollys and recordis of your chauncery so it is gracious lorde that by the statutis of your churche which we be sworne to observe and not otherwyse usyd sethyn the furst fundacion we may not elect any person to that dignite except he be a prebendary and canone in the saide churche Most humble bechechyng your hynes to be goode and gracious lord unto your saide cathedrall church and us as we be and euer shall contynew your true dayly oratours for the preservacion of your most noble estate longe to endure wretyn at your citee of Exetter the thrid day of nouembre

Your dayly bedmene the chapitour of the cathedrall church of Exeter.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to the Dean and Chapter of the cathedral church of Exeter for permission to print the items appended to this article, to Mrs. M. Rowe, of the Devon Record Office, for arranging the supply of a microfilm of the registers of bishops Arundel and Oldham, and Mrs. A.M. Erskine, archivist to the Dean and Chapter, for arranging the photography of MS. 3551 and supplying photocopies of letters from MS. 3498.

<sup>2</sup> C.H. Lawrence, ed., *The English Church and the Papacy*, (London, 1965), 224–5.

<sup>3</sup> For these two see J.A.F. Thomson, *The Transformation of Medieval England, 1370–1529*, (London, 1983), 310.

<sup>4</sup> By R.B. Dobson, in G.E. Aylmer and R. Cant, ed., *A History of York Minster*, (Oxford, 1977), 65–66.

<sup>5</sup> *HMC Calendar of the MSS of the Dean and Chapter of Wells*, II (London, 1914), 151–2. *Registers of Bishops King and de Castello* (Bath and Wells), Somerset Record Society 54 (1939), ed. H.C. Maxwell-Lyte, 85–7, no. 515.

<sup>6</sup> Devon Record Office, Register of Hugh Oldham.

<sup>7</sup> (Dean and Chapter Archives), MS. 3498. The collection is somewhat heterogeneous and the letters, often undated, are not necessarily in chronological order.

<sup>8</sup> K. Edwards, *The English Secular Cathedrals in the Middle Ages* (Manchester, 1949), 74. Indeed in the 1520s the chapter act book for the period twice records occasions when there were more residentiaries than canonical houses for them. (Dean and Chapter Archives), MS. 3551, ff. 29v, 35, 59v–60.

<sup>9</sup> Reg. Oldham, f. 28v. A.B. Emden, *Biographical Register of the University of Oxford* (Oxford, 1957–59), III. 2051. Cited hereafter as *BRUO*.

<sup>10</sup> Reg. Oldham, ff. 26, 27.

<sup>11</sup> MS. 3498, no. 65. Document 1, *infra*.

<sup>12</sup> Reg. Oldham, f. 28.

<sup>13</sup> MS. 3498, no. 56.

<sup>14</sup> Reg. Oldham, f. 28v. The spellings of the names, which vary in the register, have been standardised in accordance with J. Le Neve (ed. J.M. Horn, London, 1964), *Fasti Ecclesiae Anglicanae 1300–1541*, IX (Exeter), 58–62. Cited hereafter as *Fasti*.

<sup>15</sup> Reg. Oldham, ff. 29v–30.

<sup>16</sup> *Infra*, pp. 39–40.

<sup>17</sup> Reg. Oldham, ff. 29–9v, 30v–1.

<sup>18</sup> *C(alendar of) P(atent) R(olls) 1485–94*, 456. *Registers of Bishops Stillington and Fox* (Bath and Wells), Somerset Record Soc. 52 (1937), ed. H.C. Maxwell-Lyte, 190, no. 1111. It is not clear why the presentation to this benefice reappears on a later patent roll in 1496. *CPR 1494–1509*, 39.

<sup>19</sup> *CPR 1494–1509*, 268, 544, 610.

<sup>20</sup> *L(etters and) P(apers) F(oreign and) D(omestic, Henry VIII)*, (London, HMSO, 1920–32) I. pt. i, no. 20. (pp. 11, 14, 20).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 438/3 (p. 240).

<sup>22</sup> MS. 3498, no. 63.

<sup>23</sup> *BRUO*, II. 938.

<sup>24</sup> *LPFD*, I. pt. i, no. 218/50 (p. 112).

<sup>25</sup> Reg. Oldham, f. 37v.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, ff. 36–6v.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, ff. 35v, 36v.

<sup>28</sup> *Fasti*, IX. 60–61 indicates that these canons were still alive, but their names are not contained in the election proceedings.

<sup>29</sup> Reg. Oldham, f. 37.

<sup>30</sup> MS. 3498, no. 54. Document 2, *infra*.

<sup>31</sup> *BRUO*, III. 2136–7.

<sup>32</sup> MS. 3498, no. 55. Document 3, *infra*.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 56. Document 4, *infra*.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 57.

<sup>35</sup> The original version read, ‘we receyued your lettres’, but presumably to placate the king the drafter inserted ‘most excellent’ between ‘your’ and ‘lettres’.

<sup>36</sup> MS. 3498, no. 58. This has a number of gaps, which make it also unsuitable for printing.

<sup>37</sup> Reg. Oldham, ff. 36, 39.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, ff. 37v–8v.

<sup>39</sup> *BRUO*, III. 2136.

<sup>40</sup> Reg. Oldham, f. 23.

<sup>41</sup> MS. 3498, nos. 61, 63. In both of these Veysey describes himself as ‘priest’. In another and presumably later letter, *ibid.*, no. 62, he signs as *decanus*.

<sup>42</sup> *BRUO*, III. 1948. Devon Record Office, Register of John Arundel, ff. 1, 6v–9v.

<sup>43</sup> Reg. Oldham, ff. 1, 3v–5, 8.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, ff. 35–5v, 100, 101. He was ordained deacon on 22 December 1509 and priest on 30 March 1510. *Ibid.*, ff. 101v, 103.

<sup>45</sup> *Fasti*, IX. 58–62.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 5. MS. 3551, *passim*. There is a record of Pole’s election on ff. 41–4v.