

William Wykeham: A Life

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In the six centuries after his death in 1404 William Wykeham, bishop of Winchester, has not lacked biographers. As prelate and patron of learning, he inspired pious remembrance. Dr Thomas Aylward, one of his executors, composed a brief memoir shortly after his death, and Robert Heete, a beneficiary of his patronage, compiled a more substantial memoir in the early 1420s. A more extended account was prepared in the circle of Matthew Parker in the Elizabethan period. In 1759 Robert Lowth, later bishop of London, produced a scholarly biography that acknowledged Wykeham's larger role in public life. The standard biography by George Herbert Moberly was written as long ago as 1887. It offers a detailed narrative and a series of useful appendices, including editions of the early memoirs. It is, nonetheless, somewhat uncritical and quaint in its judgements. Its address to the 'Wykehamical public' is indicative of its tone. [\(1\)](#)

There is every reason to welcome, then, Virginia Davis's new study. Davis has brought to the task expertise on the church and the fruits of wide-ranging archival research. She has presented a wide-ranging and instructive study of a pivotal figure in the political, ecclesiastical and educational history of late medieval England.

William Wykeham was born around 1324 in Wickham, Hampshire, and the son of John Long, a villager of some substance. If not quite a story of 'rags to riches', his spectacular career can have owed little to his family background. Presumably John Long was able to sacrifice his son's labour on the farm and provide some support for his education. There were several schools in Winchester, ten miles away, and numerous churches and religious houses that could provide support for able and industrious clerks. Wykeham gained a good grounding in grammar, and valued the education he received. He seems not to have attended university, and certainly never graduated. Still, it should not be assumed that he lacked the means to further

his studies. He may have been tempted by the prospect of more gainful employment. Winchester was not a bad place to build a career, not least given royal interest in the city, accentuated in the 1340s by the renewal of the French wars and Edward III's Arthurian interests.

According to Robert Heete's memoir, Wykeham found early employment with the constable of Winchester castle. Wykeham certainly had connections with Sir John Scures and Sir William Sturmy, who successively held this office in the late 1330s and early 1340s. There may be some truth in the early tradition that through his work at the castle he came to the attention of the king. What Davis shows, however, is the range of possible connections that brought him into the orbit of the royal court. The crucial early break probably came with the advancement of William Edington, Edward III's treasurer (and later chancellor), to the see of Winchester in 1346. Wykeham was in Bishop Edington's service by 1349, and thenceforward had many opportunities to impress the king with his ability and zeal. Nonetheless, there is no record of royal patronage until 1356. Over a number of months in that year he was appointed the clerk of works at several minor royal palaces, then justice of labourers in Windsor, and finally surveyor of the works at Windsor castle and park. This appointment registered his arrival in court circles. It also provided the platform for remarkably rapid advancement in the royal service.

There is a tradition that the words 'Hoc fecit Wykeham' were carved on a wall in Windsor castle, and that Wykeham explained to the king that they did not mean that he had made the castle, but that the castle had made him. Though not recorded before the 16th century, the story seems wholly apposite. His appointment at Windsor gave him the opportunity to show his mettle in an enterprise to which the king was deeply committed. Davis might have stressed more the manner in which Wykeham's meteoric rise coincided with wholly exceptional times and opportunities. The English triumph at Poitiers in 1356, involving the capture of the French king and many leading nobles, marked the high point of Edward III's power and prestige. It encouraged, and provided the means to pay for grand displays of regal magnificence. Wykeham had the talent and energy to make them happen. From commandeering the labour force for the work on the castle, to managing the money flowing in from ransoms, he made himself indispensable to the king. He soon became one of the king's most trusted agents in the wider business of the realm. He may have accompanied the king on the great expedition to France in 1359-60. He was certainly prominent among the men in Calais negotiating the Treaty of Bretigny in 1360.

By this stage Wykeham was a major beneficiary of royal patronage, increasingly in the form of presentation to church benefices. He was, nonetheless, still a clerk in minor orders, and had made no irrevocable commitment to the church. As Davis points out, it was by no means inevitable that he would pursue an ecclesiastical career. Geoffrey Chaucer, who also first appeared in court circles in the late 1350s, had similar skills and later served in Wykeham's former office of clerk of the works, settled on a secular career. Wykeham, who was 37 when he took the first step towards ordination, certainly left his options open for an unusually long time. His decision to proceed to holy orders in 1361 may have been a calculated move. No one knew better than him that following the peace with France the king would find it increasingly hard to reward the laymen in his entourage. Once the profits from ransoms were exhausted, the pickings would be slim. The king could best support his servants by promoting them in the church. Still, Davis is right not to be unduly cynical. Wykeham had a high regard for the priesthood, and his subsequent career suggests that he had a genuine vocation. It might have been noted that the king himself had a conversion experience of sorts in France in April 1360. A fearsome tempest on 'Black Tuesday' prompted him to abandon the campaign and make a solemn vow to the Virgin Mary to accept any fair terms to bring the war to an end. [\(2\)](#)

In the 1360s Edward remained reliant on Wykeham for the conduct of his affairs. In 1363 he described him as 'his secretary, who stays by his side in constant attendance on his service and who with all his servants is under the king's special protection' (p. 31). A ministerial reshuffle after the retirement of Bishop Edington as chancellor led to the appointment of Wykeham as keeper of the privy seal. A number of contemporaries noted, disapprovingly, his influence with the king. His income from the church continued to increase. He topped the list of clergymen holding livings in plurality in 1366, with an income of £873 5s 8d, three times as large as his nearest rival. The author of a Wycliffite tract presumably had him in mind when he complained about the preferment to churches of men who were not 'clerks of learning or of good life but a

kitchen clerk or a penny clerk or one wise in building castles or other worldly doing although he cannot well read his psalter and knoweth not the commandments of God nor sacraments of the church'. Finally, on Bishop Edington's death in 1366, the king instructed the monks of St Swithuns to elect Wykeham to the see of Winchester. In his account of the event in his chronicle, John of Reading added the bitter comment: 'The mammon of iniquity raises the unworthy to be prelates' (p. 41-2). The pope played for time before confirming the election. In 1367, barely five years after being ordained as priest, Wykeham was duly consecrated bishop. In the following year he had the satisfaction of being installed bishop of his native diocese. In the mean time he was appointed chancellor of England.

The 1360s saw significant developments in the history of the English state. Wykeham's role in administrative reform and the establishment of the concept of public finance is hard to assess. Davis is more positive in her assessment than most scholars. She stresses his managerial success and attention to detail. This line is not wholly compelling. His organisational flair and business acumen may rather have made him impatient of bureaucratic forms and consultative processes. It is clear that Bishop Edington made much of the running in relation to the reforms, and Archbishop Langham probably played the greater role in terms of political management. Still, Davis is right to question the degree to which the parliamentary proceedings that led to his dismissal in 1371 should be seen as an indictment of his term in office. In the Good Parliament of 1376 the Commons regarded him as an ally in its assault on the court party. Conversely, John of Gaunt and his allies viewed him as their enemy, serving him in kind by laying charges of maladministration during his time as chancellor. Wykeham was stripped of the temporalities of the bishopric, and found himself dependent on the charity of his friends. According to Thomas Walsingham, the particular cause of the royal spite was Wykeham's role in spreading the rumour that Gaunt was a changeling. It was claimed that Queen Philippa had revealed this fact to Wykeham on her deathbed, and asked him to make the truth known if ever Gaunt sought the crown. The allegation with respect to Gaunt certainly had some currency in the late 1370s, though Wykeham's role in its dissemination cannot be credited. Still, Gaunt was seeking a change in the order of the succession in 1376, and Wykeham was presumably among the lords who opposed this measure. (3) It is instructive that on Richard II's accession in 1377 he was fully restored to royal favour.

Despite his continuing service to the crown, Wykeham did not neglect his diocese. Since it extended to the south bank of the Thames, he was able to use his palace at Southwark to attend meetings of council and parliament in Westminster. Davis shows him to have been a conscientious diocesan. He pursued an active policy with respect to the estates of the bishopric of Winchester, increasing the number of manors under direct management and the acreage in demesne. More remarkable, in view of his limited experience with the cure of souls, is his solid record with respect to pastoral affairs. During his pontificate he conducted almost all the ordinations in person. He took some care to assess the qualifications of ordinands, and encouraged the clergy to pursue further education. He was attentive to the state of the fabric of the parish churches, not least the churches that had been appropriated by monasteries. From 1373 he conducted a number of visitations of his diocese, and maintained a close oversight over the monasteries. Needless to say, Wykeham proved a great builder. At the cathedral he was largely responsible for the transformation of 'an essentially Norman nave to a contemporary and magnificent Perpendicular one' (p. 114). He renovated the episcopal palaces, especially Bishop's Waltham, his favourite residence in his last years.

A major concern from the late 1360s was his chantry and collegiate foundations. In 1368 he acquired lands to endow a chantry for his parents in Southwick priory. In 1369 he secured property in Oxford to form an endowment for scholars. By this time he was probably already supporting both schoolboys at Winchester and students at Oxford, and making plans for the establishment of linked colleges. In 1379 he established Saint Mary College of Winchester, soon known as New College, in Oxford. It was remarkable for its munificence, the provision of places for undergraduates, and its preference for theology over law. The second component of his scheme came to fruition with the establishment of the college at Winchester in 1382. His foundations certainly have a personal dimension: a deep piety with respect to his family and benefactors, and an acknowledgment of his own debt to schooling. Yet they are monuments to broader concerns: prayer for the king and the kingdom, and the provision of educated priests for the ministry.

Wykeham remained active in government in the reign of Richard II. A member of the regency council, he

also served on the various councils that effectively took the crown into commission in the late 1380s. At the age of 65, Wykeham undertook a second term as chancellor in 1389. Even after his surrender of the great seal in 1391, he remained an active member of the king's council. Davis is right not to play down this record of service. It is not easy, however, to be clear about its import. It is tempting to regard him as an elder statesman guiding the young king. His second term as chancellor coincided with the most constructive phase of Richard's rule. The old bishop and the young king shared an interest in building, and employed the same architects and craftsmen on their projects. Wykeham entertained Richard at his palace in Winchester in 1393. On the other hand, the relationship cannot have been entirely problem free. Davis suggests that anxiety, especially his concern for the future of his chantry and collegiate foundations, prompted him to be vigilant. He had good reason to be wary of the king. After all, he had served on the councils that the king believed had encroached on his prerogative. His concerns would have been raised by the banishment of his colleague Archbishop Arundel in 1397. He waited on events during the revolution of 1399, but was an active member of Henry IV's council until shortly before his death in 1404.

Davis is a careful scholar, and does not stray far from what the sources allow. She provides a good account of Wykeham's public life, but finds it hard to probe the inner life. Davis does her best to document Wykeham's own religion. He was devoted to the Virgin Mary; he drew comfort from the liturgy and church music; and he believed in church ornamentation and the power of prayer. It was a conventional, public religion. His greatest achievements were the buildings and the collegiate institutions that gave expression and permanence to his vision. His early biographers offer occasional vignettes regarding his piety: his resort as a child to the shrine of the Virgin Mary in the cathedral to hear mass intoned by Richard Pekis, one of the monks, and his faith and his humility as he approached his end. Davis's study is most interesting where details begin to coalesce, as in her accounts of his kindred, his accumulation of benefices, his building projects, his network of gentry friends, and his dinner guests. It is especially instructive when it sets Wykeham's life and career in a comparative context. Perhaps more could be achieved here. Instructive comparisons could be made with other clerks on the make in the late 1350s, like John Winwick, or other bishops of his generation, like his neighbour William Rede, bishop of Chichester. Winwick was likewise pursuing a somewhat hybrid career. As keeper of the privy seal, he was closer to the king than Wykeham. Though not a graduate, he too seems to have had in mind a collegiate foundation at Oxford. His death in 1360 eliminated a real rival. William Rede became bishop of Chichester by papal provision in the year in which Wykeham was installed at Winchester. A graduate and a notable scholar, he likewise seems to have been concerned to promote an educated priesthood. He acquired a vast collection of books that he transferred, in instalments, to Merton and other colleges in Oxford.

All in all, Davis has produced a book that will provide much food for thought. Wykeham's remarkable career demonstrates what was possible in 14th-century England. However, while he was able to give his kinsmen and friends a better start than he enjoyed, none of them enjoyed a modicum of his success. Given the scale of the endowment of Winchester and New Colleges, it is striking how few early Wykehamists achieved careers of note. High mortality rates are part of the story: 10 per cent of his scholars died at Winchester College, and 'many others died at New College or shortly after graduating, before their careers had made much impact' (p. 159). Wykeham himself clearly owed something to a robust constitution. Interestingly enough, his long pontificate marked the beginning of a trend at Winchester. His immediate successors, Henry Beaufort and William Waynflete, each occupied the see for around 40 years. Remarkably, there were only three bishops of Winchester between 1366 and 1486. Each of them, and indeed many of their predecessors and successors, served as chancellor of England. Collectively they provided a significant degree of stability and continuity in English public life in the later middle ages.

Notes

1. G. H. Moberly, *Life of William of Wykeham, sometime Bishop of Winchester, and Lord High Chancellor of England* (Winchester, 1887). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. C. J. Rogers, 'The Anglo-French peace negotiations of 1354-60 reconsidered', in J. S. Bothwell, *The Age of Edward III* (Woodbridge, 2001), pp. 211-13. [Back to \(2\)](#)

3. M. J. Bennett, 'Edward III's entail and the succession to the crown, 1376-1471', *English Historical Review*, 113 (1998), 586-7, 590. [Back to \(3\)](#)

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