

THE BISHOP AND THE GUILD: THE WELLS CRISIS OF 1341–3

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INTRODUCTION

In 1342–3 the Bishop of Bath and Wells, Ralph of Shrewsbury, found himself opposed by a commune formed from amongst the townsfolk of Wells, his diocesan headquarters. In medieval terms a commune was an association of townsfolk not sanctioned by their lord, bound by oaths and normally pursuing goals contrary to his interests. In contrast to Western Europe communes were rare in Britain. The *Cambridge Urban History of Britain 600–1540* has only five references to them of which three deal with events in London in 1191. When communes appeared or were alleged they were otherwise most commonly associated with monastic boroughs such as Bury St Edmunds, St Albans, Abingdon and Dunstable.¹

So the events at Wells were unusual and worth exploring. Furthermore, it will be seen that this account disproves a number of assumptions that have been made in the past. Two of these are that the wealthiest citizens led the commune and that the troubles were responsible for Ralph's decision to wall and moat his palace.

THE BISHOP

Ralph of Shrewsbury was appointed in 1329. His background was mainly academic. Government was then dominated by Edward II's widow, Isabella, and her lover, Mortimer. Soon afterwards the young Edward III questioned the appointment suggesting an alternative. As a result Ralph had to lobby Avignon before taking his place. The Pope was angry as he had his own plans for the see. Ralph

was forced to conciliate him with a payment of 2000 florins. He was confirmed after a delay of six months.

On his arrival at Wells Ralph soon showed his character. The palace complex was embellished with a moat, walls and a drawbridge. As mentioned, this has been assumed to be a response to the commune but a recently discovered document shows that the works were done before that.² They were probably completed for Edward III's visit at Christmas 1331. A sumptuous entertainment was provided but the King does not seem to have been entirely reconciled. Mortimer had written to the Papal Court supporting Ralph. This will not have endeared him to Edward. It is striking that Ralph unlike most medieval bishops of the diocese was never employed as a great officer of state or on diplomatic missions. For his part the bishop seems to have limited his contacts with government. He frequently pleaded infirmity as a reason for not attending Parliament.

Ralph also inaugurated schemes to improve the management of his diocese and estates. He soon began a programme of visitations to both the parishes and monasteries of Somerset.³ At the latter he tried to improve both conduct and administration. This work continued until checked by infirmity in his last years. In 1331 there were discussions on housing, and thus controlling, the cathedral's vicars choral. This had been considered in 1320 without result. There was again no immediate result because of difficulties in obtaining a site and paying for building work. Ralph finally forced through the building of Vicars' Close in 1348 as the plague outbreak struck and he had taken refuge in his most remote manor, Wiveliscombe. He solved the question of a site by using a vacant canonical house in his gift⁴ and

probably financed the works himself. In 1334 he considered improving the location of the Wells fairs, petitioning the King that the Chancellor be ordered that the charters held in the Hanaper be amended so that the fairs could be moved from what was now an inadequate site outside the palace gates.⁵ In 1337 he took considerable trouble to have his manor of Cheddar excluded from Mendip Forest thus removing the royal foresters' jurisdiction from his property.⁶ In 1338 he discussed two matters with the chapter. The more amicable concerned the completion of the cathedral. The other turned on his personal right to correct irregularities. In March 1340 he obtained a license to crenellate. It has been assumed that this related to the palace and was a sign of growing tension in Wells. But, as explained, the palace was already walled and the grant is more complex. It was to build a wall around the cathedral churchyard, the houses of the canons and his palace. He was licensed to crenellate the wall and make towers in it.⁷ So this was a wall around the heart of the Liberty. It may have had a defensive element but its main purposes were probably prestige and control. It would limit movements into and out of the precinct and thus help isolate the priests from the temptations of town.

So Ralph was a persistent man, a good administrator and one who had a strong sense of his own rights, duties and status. His removal to Wiveliscombe, while many of his parish priests perished with their flocks,⁸ suggests other less desirable aspects of his character. However, he showed his usual efficiency in appointing replacements. Unfortunately, his managerial skills did not extend to his own finances. The bribes, building and entertaining of his first years left him in debt. This probably explains an agreement of c. 1333 with the Wells guild (discussed below). In 1341 the king allowed him to appropriate the rectory of Chew Magna to aid his finances.⁹ Nevertheless, he embarked on major building projects at many of his Somerset manors including Blackford Manor that was decayed by 1391 when the chapter described it as unnecessary.¹⁰

THE TOWN AND ITS GUILD

The details of the emergence of a town at Wells are obscure. The settlement must have suffered when Bishop John of Tours shifted the see to Bath in 1088. On the other hand, it may have provided opportunities for enterprise. By c.1166 when John's

second successor, Robert of Lewes, took an interest in the place it had three fairs each of one day and a weekly market. Robert's charter established boundaries and granted burgess status to the townsfolk. However, his main motive may have been to shift the fairs from the church and its *atrium* to 'the broad places' of the town. He also increased the duration of the fairs to three days each and gave the burgesses a monopoly of trade in hides and fells. His successor Reginald granted three charters. The first two confirmed Robert's grants while the third extended the borough. Interestingly, the confirmation of burgess status was stated to be on the petition of the townsfolk, suggesting they already had a collective voice. Reginald was followed as bishop by Savaric. He spent much time on the royal service and in imposing himself as abbot of Glastonbury. Nevertheless, he granted another charter giving a fourth fair of three days. In 1201 he also obtained a confirmation from King John, who recognized Wells as a free town with free burgesses. John also added a fifth fair of eight days that increased the fair days to a final 20.¹¹

Then in 1206 the monks of Bath elected as bishop, Jocelin, a native of Wells. He shifted the diocesan administration back to Wells and began the bishop's palace. A papal arbitration after his death left Bath only with primacy in the see's title and the right of its monks to participate in joint elections. The future of Wells was now assured and by 1327 it was the second wealthiest town in Somerset exceeded only by Bridgwater.¹²

King John's charter recognized the town's borough status, so no bishop could change his mind on that, but it made no other alterations. Wells remained the bishop's borough without rights of self-government. Nevertheless, medieval citizens could achieve a good deal using guild or parish organizations. A guild duly appeared at Wells. It seems to have evolved from the Holy Trinity Guild in St Cuthbert's parish church. In 1240 Jocelin had granted St Cuthbert's to the dean and chapter. They kept the great tithes and installed perpetual vicars. The guild came to provide administrative support to the vicar. By the time guild records begin in 1377 it nominated the churchwardens, controlled the fabric account, administered the properties left to the church and housed and paid the priests who served the obits and chantries in it. At that time the church supported 14 priests. By the Reformation the town guild was the biggest landowner in the borough and it seems that about half its properties were given for church purposes.¹³

Meanwhile the bishops adapted manorial systems to govern the borough. It was given courts that were separated from the existing manorial and hundred systems. The bishop's chief officer was his bailiff, while the townsfolk were represented in his court by two reeves. There were also jurors and verderers who like the bailiff could make presentations to the courts. The verderies were subdivisions of the borough despite their rural-sounding name. There were four named for their principle streets. The Liberty of St Andrew around the cathedral and palace had separate arrangements and to its east the suburb of Byestewalles remained a tithing of the bishop's extensive manor of Wells. It was not merged with the borough until 1835.

We gradually learn more of the guild. Cathedral records begin to refer to its seneschal or steward (later called the master).¹⁴ It also seems to have infiltrated the manorial system, nominating jurors and verderers. However, it wanted more. An undated petition survives for what was claimed to be a routine confirmation of privileges but actually asked for much more. The guild wanted the right to select a mayor and to have commercial privileges similar to the merchant guilds of Bath and Winchester. Shaw is almost certainly right in dating this to the accession of Edward II in 1307. It was not granted.¹⁵ The guild then negotiated with the bishop who was short of money. They were granted most of the rights in the borough in return for a composite rent of 100 marks (£66.66p) p.a. The indenture is missing and the arrangements were lost in the ensuing crisis.¹⁶ It was in place by 1333 when the bailiff, Richard atte Moore, was also a burgess. This combination was only reproduced once in the Middle Ages in 1467 and on that occasion (discussed below) it was a matter of a serving bailiff joining the guild. The agreement did not involve a grant of the tolls from the fairs as both the petition of 1334 and the bishop's complaint of 1343 demonstrate.

This activity was driven by increased prosperity. Wells already had the advantages of its cathedral and bishop together with a suitable location to act as an exchange centre for the Mendips Hills and Somerset Levels. To these were now added a major role in the expanding cloth industry. From about 1325 to 1400 it was at its most significant in national and regional terms. As mentioned it was the second wealthiest town in Somerset in 1327. But it was also notable for its rich elite. Only four Somerset townsfolk then paid the lay subsidy on movables worth £20 and three of these lived in Wells. Furthermore, the richest third of payers had 79% of the assessed wealth. This

exceeded all other Somerset towns and (disregarding places where figures are distorted by resident lords of the manor) only six other places approached it with between 62 and 70%. In 1334 it was still second to Bridgwater for wealth in Somerset but also twelfth in the south-west and 86th nationally. By the 1350s it cloth production had made it an aulnage centre and it ranked eighth nationally in that respect. Subsequently, in 1377 the poll tax indicates that it was the most populous place in the county, sixth in the region and 44th nationally.¹⁷

As a result the merchants of Wells developed wide contacts. Foreigners were also drawn to the town. One of the three top payers in 1327, Peter le Botoyr, was originally from France. A leading figure of the next generation was also French. He was Peter le Monier from Amiens. Pre-1350 bynames indicate the presence of three more families of French origins plus a Scot and one from modern Belgium. Peter le Monier's career will be elaborated to conclude this section as it will illuminate later events.

A Peter le Monnier first appears in English records in 1306 when he made a claim for wool seized by King Edward I at Bristol, Southampton and Winchester immediately before the outbreak of war with France.¹⁸ Obviously, this Peter had a career going well back into the 13th century. So he could be the grandfather or uncle of the man who settled in Wells. The first certain reference to the latter came in 1314/5 when he and his brother James le Petit established James' son Thomas as their agent in Exeter.¹⁹ Then in 1329 the Patent Rolls contained a grant. Peter, son of James le Monoier of Amiens was to be free of customs on the wool, hides, wood and other goods he imported or exported. This was because of the labours daily endured by the Earl of Salisbury 'dwelling at the King's side'. A briefer series of safe conducts followed from 1333 to 1347. The first describes Peter as the King's merchant and a burgess of Wells. That of 1340 is more detailed. Peter is described as by birth of Amiens but 'now a burgess of Wells, having there a wife and children and a permanent domicile paying lot and scot'. The privileges granted extended to his men and servants. The grant was out of consideration for the Earl of Salisbury, Peter being of his household and specially attendant on his business. The final grant has an associated document allowing him to take advantage of the truce in the war to bring over his kinsman, William, as an apprentice.²⁰

So Peter was a merchant of substance and doubly well connected. His family were merchants with a network of contacts in south-west England. Also he

had strong links with the English court that probably extended into the interlinked areas of diplomacy and espionage. By the 1340s he was exporting cloth through Bristol and Dartmouth. But it seems likely that the war had restricted former activities as he became active in the Wells property market where he assembled properties in 1342–3 and laid out the lane that was to bear his name. By this late stage he had also acquired a fulling mill at nearby Wookey.²¹ By 1343 his wife was dead. In 1346 he married a much younger woman who was to outlive him by 40 years. She was Margery, daughter of Thomas Testwode. Thomas had been one of the three worth £20 in 1327. The Wells records allow this tax assessment to be compared with property holdings. Often results vary sharply but Thomas stands at the head of both lists. He also had interests in nine properties. So this marriage was an alliance of the town's two richest men.²²

THE CRISIS

In 1336 there was a hint of trouble brewing. A crowd of citizens invaded the palace and attacked a party of strangers who were there with the dean. The attackers were promptly excommunicated.²³ More generally, it is obvious that the guild was not content with its deal with the bishop. They were an increasingly affluent and sophisticated group and must have realized how their rights lagged behind many boroughs. They may also have found the 100 marks excessive. It certainly exceeded what had been the profits received by previous bishops.²⁴

In 1341 they went behind the bishop's back and approached the king for a new charter. Edward was burdened with debts from his Flemish campaign. He was willing to oblige without questions. For £40 the charter was granted giving everything a town might want. They were to have a mayor, bailiffs, constables and coroners of their own choosing, deal directly with the Exchequer and decide all legal issues except crown pleas. They were granted generous commercial privileges and the right to build a gaol.

In fact this procedure was flawed. Such a charter should have been preceded by an inquisition *ad quod damnum* to determine whose rights might be infringed. It would have revealed that the bishop was being deprived of his most profitable borough without compensation while the keeper of the county gaol would suffer lesser losses. Nevertheless, the charter was put in place at once. Wells' first (and only) medieval mayor was elected and a further five

marks was paid for a license to levy murage. This was a toll on goods to finance town walls.

The choice of mayor is striking. He was Walter de Middleton and he was not an obvious candidate given the medieval emphasis on government by the *majores*, 'better sort' or 'best men'. His was not a wealthy family. His father, Roger, had not paid the 1327 subsidy while Walter's brother John was noted in 1343 as having no goods to attach him. Walter cannot have been greatly experienced. He had succeeded his father only some eight years before. However, he was soon after in overseas ventures in partnership with Henry Russell of Salisbury.²⁵ In terms of property holding he had interests in four tenements placing him and Richard atte Moore as an equal eighth in a hierarchy of property ownership. That list is headed by Thomas Testwode and Peter le Monier. They are followed by Thomas le Devenysch who owned two rural properties and five tenements. Moreover, his two adjacent High Street houses were fronted by five shop units. These men not only far exceeded Walter in wealth but also in the other attributes of the 'better sort' that is age and experience. Peter's career has been outlined. Thomas Testwode first appeared in the Wells property records in 1309 and he had served at least four terms as an MP in the 1320s and 1330s. Thomas le Devenysch had certainly been active in Wells for over 30 years. If the editors of *Wells City Charters* are right in dating his first transaction to c. 1283 he was approaching the end of a career spanning over 60 years.²⁶

These senior figures all seem more obvious candidates for mayor. Indeed by the standards used from 1377 all would have served multiple terms as master. In contrast Walter would have been a marginal candidate, selected if no one more qualified was available or rewarded with a single term at the end of a long career. His choice suggests that the guild was divided. Senior figures felt misgivings about the course selected or other influences were at work.

Any doubts were justified. Bishop Ralph was not the man to accept such an affront to his dignity and finances. Within three months questions were being raised in Chancery and the Exchequer. Ralph was certainly behind this reconsideration. In November the King issued a writ summoning the burgesses to explain why they should not lose their charter. The case was clear and the charter was quashed in Michaelmas term 1342. Shaw rightly points out that the townsfolk had lost by trying to do things on the cheap. They had neither offered the king a fee farm from the town nor compensated the bishop for his loss.²⁷ They were left with no influential friend.

Some of the burgesses were unwilling to accept defeat. In January they formed a sworn commune to resist the bishop and maintain the new system. As a result there were two conflicting sets of courts each distraining, fining and arresting the suitors of the other. The results were a series of assaults but not the riots that earlier historians have written about. The major incidents according to the bishop were as follow. In January three of his employees were gaoled for opposing the commune. In January and February his bailiff's hundred courts and view of the frankpledge were disrupted. In May some of his servants were injured when goods seized in lieu of fines were rescued. Customary dues were also withheld. These were the tolsester, the bishop's right to buy a portion of any brewing of beer at a fixed price, and the tolls due at fairs. The bishop alleged that townsfolk collected the fair tolls with bows and drawn swords. In July the bishop took legal action in his own right. His initial complaint was against 29 named citizens but the local jury added another 33 including the townsfolk's attorney Guy de Astington. They still acted in concert, asking the court's permission to discuss their position. Having won a recess they left and never returned. They were found guilty in their absence and collectively fined £3000.²⁸

It is worth examining those named for the light it throws on events. To begin with it must be stressed that they were a minority between three and five percent of the total population. The names on the two lists vary sharply. Of the first group nine are otherwise unknown, while three featured only as witnesses to documents and five are associated with a single property. The remainder had between two and six properties. The most prosperous was Thomas le Saltare who had paid on movables worth £5 in 1327 and now controlled six properties. In contrast 20 of the second group are otherwise unknown. Another four are documented only as witnesses while a further four had a single property. The remaining five had interests in two or three properties. This last group includes Guy de Astington who was obviously a rather different case. In addition three of our first list and ten of the second are identified by trade descriptions. This is in part to distinguish two John Markaunts and two John le Langes, but if normal Wells usage has been followed it means that these were minor traders not burgesses or members of the guild.

More generally it is clear that the wealthiest were not involved. They cannot have liked the disruption to trade and must have had a good idea of the

outcome. English kings had no time for communes. Richard of Devizes had commented that Henry II would in no circumstances concede a commune. He fined York and Gloucester for setting them up.²⁹ His successors saw them as a threat. There was no parallel with the Continent where monarchs might support a commune to weaken their mighty lords or where the great Flemish towns could exploit the tensions between their count and the French king. The young Edward III would have been aware of the dangers. He had had to intervene militarily to end the conflict at Bury St Edmunds that had resulted in dead on both sides.

The 1327 subsidy return, although portraying a somewhat earlier period than 1341–3, broadly confirms our picture. Twenty-six of the payers can be shown to have survived to 1343. Of these, twelve were named in the bishop's action. They include none of those assessed on goods worth £20 or £10, although the son of one of the latter was involved. Richard le Eyr was the sole payer assessed on £8 while three of the five assessed on £5 were listed. They were Thomas le Saltare, Hugh de Somerton and Stephen Wedmore. There were also five who paid on goods worth £1.

So it seems that the movement was led by those of second rank in wealth, who achieved some popular support amongst those not normally appearing in surviving records. This analysis receives confirmation from the ordering of names in the bishop's initial complaint. John le Kyng is first and he was the obvious ringleader in the various acts of disruption (although not necessarily in their planning). At this stage he owned three tenements. However, the following names, Saltare, Wedmore, Markaunt, Somerton and atte Moore seem to be a listing by wealth. In contrast the otherwise unknown individuals come at its end. In view of what has been stated about Walter de Middleton it is worth noting that he appears only as eleventh.³⁰

Other facts can be discovered about participation. Family obviously mattered. John le Kyng was either the stepbrother or half-brother of Walter and John de Middleton. His mother, Juliana la Kyng, married as her second husband Roger de Middleton. She must have been relatively young at the time as she was widowed by 1309 and was to outlive Roger. Juliana seems to have been a formidable woman. She kept her hand on most of the le Kyng properties (not just the third of a widow's dowry) until her death.³¹ This may help to explain John's assertive behaviour.

More generally families acted together. All the Eyrns and Middletons were involved while both

Jordan le Bakere and his son appear in the second list. Conversely, no members of the substantial Boghiere, de Mertokey or Churchestyle families were named. The latter were probably the longest established family in the town.

Age also played a role. John le Ropere and Walter Compton were early in careers that were to make them merchants, major property owners and masters over the following three decades. More generally, none of those named appears in the property records before 1320, contrasting sharply with the long careers of Thomas Testwode and Thomas le Devenysch. Links with the church were less significant. Thomas le Saltare and Thomas le Devenysch each had a son who had become a priest in the diocese but they took opposite sides. Indeed two priests were named in the second list. Probably they were obit priests in St Cuthbert's and followed their employers.

So the supporters of the commune can be characterized as drawn from the second rank of wealth and younger members amongst the elite but achieving some measure of wider support. What cannot be discovered is the exact position of non-joiners. Was there an active opposition or did most merely keep quiet? It is likely that there were some less active or poorer commune supporters who were not named. However, the majority of lesser payers in 1327 and the holders of one or two tenements seem to have followed the example of Thomas Testwode and Peter le Monier and held aloof.

THE AFTERMATH

It is unlikely that the bishop enforced the fine, instead using its existence as a guarantee of good conduct. It was not in his interest grossly to disrupt the town economy. As a result most careers continued unchecked except in as much as plague seems to have carried off many of those discussed. John le Ropere was master for the first time in 1347 and again in 1348. There were two exceptions to this continuity. John le Kyng sold his properties and had left the town by late 1345.³² Walter de Middleton stayed and suffered. He was excommunicated until he showed sufficient repentance for 'presuming to deprive the church of Wells of its liberties by malicious government'.³³ He presumably showed sufficient contrition but fought back in a small way. He and John Markaunt owned a New Street tenement. Walter now stopped paying an obit rent citing the Statute of Mortmain as his reason.³⁴ In

fact the rent predated Mortmain which was not retrospective. He seems to have become isolated. Certainly, he was no longer asked to witness transactions. Worse was to follow. In 1355 the king established a commission to investigate his claim that Sir Richard de Acton, John de Somerton, Walter de Holder, Guy de Astington, Nicholas Porter and others 'broke his closes and houses and imprisoned him until he made in writing a quitclaim to the said Richard of his tenements in the town and carried away his goods'.³⁵ If this was an attempt to run him out of town it failed. His last transaction was in 1358. Alternatively he may have seemed an easy victim to the ill-disposed lacking influential friends. He never seems to have recovered his property. Sir Richard later granted Wells property to Barrow Nunnery and at least two houses they controlled by the next century correspond to former Middleton tenements. Again the 1358 transaction was a grant to Walter and his wife of a house in plebian Tucker Street probably to serve as a new home replacing the family's High Street tenement.³⁶ The grantors were the daughter and son-in-law of his former associate Walter Compton. However, it is striking that two of his alleged attackers, Guy and Nicholas, had been his associates in 1343.

In one respect normal relations were soon resumed. By 1340 bishops called on leading citizens to form part of the body of witnesses to documents. This must be seen in part as a social event as a cup of wine and a cake were usually provided for participants. By 1348 Thomas le Saltare and John le Ropere were both listed as witnesses despite their leading roles in the commune.³⁷

Bishop Ralph continued to excite strong feelings. In 1349 there was an incident at Yeovil. He was attacked and a number of his servants injured. Ralph was trapped in the church until dark and then had to take refuge in the rectory until rescued by 'devoted sons of the church'.³⁸ Subsequently some 60 men had to do penitence. He also pushed on with church reorganization. In 1354 he housed the cathedral choristers. He had a long episcopate and according to the author of the second medieval history of the diocese, the *Historia Minor*, was much venerated in his later years. However, one suspects that the writer had been one of his household. Certainly he is the hero of the work. But there is some truth to the claim. In part it could be related to the fact that he spent his last years at Wiveliscombe while his suffragan presided at Wells. He pleaded infirmity but by that time the plague had reappeared. The modern *Oxford History of National Biography* remarks of him

'historians have regarded him as an exemplary medieval bishop'.³⁹ It is hoped that this piece gives a more balanced view.

As a group the guild had lost heavily in abortive payments to the crown and legal costs. In addition it had lost the powers obtained in the 1330s. It is also likely that the membership had been split by events. There was now an effort to reassert unity. This is best illustrated by documents of April 1348. Thomas le Devenysch had died bequeathing his High Street tenements jointly to the guild and churchwardens to secure obits. The grants were subject to his widow and son having life interests. A bond was issued to them by the guild. It is signed by John le Ropere as master and 27 others. Of these twelve had been involved with the commune. The first names on the list are arranged so as to alternate. John is followed by Peter le Monier, next is Thomas le Saltare and then Thomas Testwode. Subsequently the order is less clear but prominent non-joiners such as the Boghiere brothers mingle with Richard le Eyr and his former associates. A related transaction names the churchwardens. Adam de Schepton had supported the commune. William Coksone had not.⁴⁰

The group seems to have avoided any subsequent challenge to Bishop Ralph however indirect. The wide portion of High Street had long been occupied by benches on market day. In 1345 Ralph granted a portion of the street to the Riche family who built a house on it. In 1351 a burgess, Adam de Carleton, followed this example, converting his bench to a permanent cook's shop. His fellows took him to the king's court alleging obstruction of the highway and he was forced to demolish his building.⁴¹ The earlier encroachment must have been as objectionable but they were obviously inhibited from challenging that.

Over time the guild recovered its position. By 1377 it was appointing in addition to its own officers, the MPs, two shambles wardens and four street wardens (one per verdery). Also its constables had a court that not only dealt with its members but also with minor disorders involving others. Much of this would have helped the bishop's officers. They did not have to deal with trivial and unrewarding matters such as pursuing pigs, sorting out brawls or misdeeds of butchers. The shambles wardens had a double duty. They reported contraventions by guild members to the master and by others to the bailiff. This demonstrates the fact that the guild remained a commune in one respect. Members swore to take their disputes to the guild. They were only to use the bishop's or crown courts with permission. This, of course, deprived their feudal superiors of the profits of justice.

In 1467 the guild seemed to be on the verge of a breakthrough. Bishop Stillington's episcopate ran from 1466 to 1491 but he spent only 25 days in his diocese. In his absence the bishop's bailiff, accountant and apparitor joined the guild. Two of these served as its constables for the following year. They were also selected for its council and as MPs. The increased power of the guild was shown in 1473 when the master, acting in the guild court, forced the apparitor to withdraw fines he had imposed on three burgesses while exercising the bishop's jurisdiction.⁴² This may explain why the arrangement was not continued.

The next challenges to the *status quo* came from the bishop's side. Bishop Fox was one of Henry VII's ministers. Nevertheless, he found time to startle the guild in 1493 with probing questions about their rights and claims. They eventually satisfied him with copies of both the charters and bishop's customals.⁴³ Then in Bishop Clerk's time worse followed. In 1539 the townsfolk complained that the bishop's bailiff, his ambitious brother Thomas, was charging them for licenses to do business in breach of the practice of centuries.⁴⁴

The Reformation weakened the bishops and the townsfolk saw their chance. In the time of Bishop Berkeley (1560–81) they employed the twin tactics of encroaching on his prerogatives and applying for a new charter. They opened a linen market and built in the middle of High Street and across Horse Lane. More seriously, they appointed a recorder. The physical developments survived but the commissioners sent by Elizabeth I saw through their requests and pretensions. All they got was a confirmation of existing privileges. It was only after this failure that the guild at last faced the need to buy an improved status. The next bishop, Thomas Godwin, was paid and a new charter of 1589 finally gave them self-government. The master and guild were transformed to a mayor and corporation.⁴⁵

CONCLUSIONS

These events demonstrate the difficulties facing the inhabitants of a mesne town if they sought to improve their status without their lord's co-operation. If it was an ecclesiastical lord the task was even more difficult. Opposition to the lord's feudal rights could be represented as an attack on 'mother church'. The religious sanctions of penitence and excommunication could then be brought into play. Bishop

Ralph showed himself adept at such tactics at both Wells and Yeovil. From what is known of Ralph's character it is apparent that he was the wrong man to challenge. It is also clear that any hint of conspiracy or commune would guarantee the hostility of the crown in England.

The nature of the Wells commune, younger and rather less rich members of the elite plus some support from the 'small people,' is similar to many reformist movements or oppositions in medieval boroughs. For example, it characterizes the group in London led by John of Northampton from 1376 at least as well as that commonly used by historians who have portrayed his group as non-victuallers opposing the power of the victuallers.⁴⁶ However, the detail here demonstrates that the term elite must be used with caution as there can be marked distinctions within such a group. It also shows that other forces were at work besides economic power. Family was obviously of major importance. Also, in Wells the townsfolk were limited in the play that could be allowed to faction as they lacked all legal powers. If they did not maintain a unified front they were nothing. So if the events of 1341–3 did expose differences it is clear that ranks had closed by 1348. This was done by almost everyone, even his former associates, abandoning the only medieval mayor, the unfortunate Walter de Middleton.

Endnotes

- 1 D.M. Palliser (ed.) *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain I* (Cambridge, 2000), 68, 75, 208–9, 297–8, 304.
- 2 A.J. Scrase and R.W. Dunning 'The Bishop's Palace, Wells', *Notes and Queries for Somerset and Dorset* 35, 2001, 52–5.
- 3 W. Page (ed.) *Victoria County History of Somerset II* (London, 1911), 24–5.
- 4 Historical Manuscripts Commission (H.M.C.) *Calendar of the Manuscripts of the Dean and Chapter of Wells* (London, 1907 & 1914), i 181, 219; Somerset Record Society (S.R.S.) *Two Chartularies of Bath Priory* (Taunton, 1893) 179; W. Rodwell and F. Neale 'Begun while the Black Death raged...the Vicars' Close at Wells' in R. Hall and D. Stocker (eds.) *Vicars Choral at English Cathedrals: Cantate Domino* (Oxford, 2005), 112–378.
- 5 The National Archives (T.N.A.) SC 8/242/1 2060.
- 6 S.R.S. *Collectanea I* (Taunton, 1924), 76–80.

- 7 *Calendar of Patent Rolls (C.P.R.) 1338–40* 466; Scrase and Dunning 'The Bishop's Palace, Wells' 54.
- 8 P. Ziegler *Black Death* (London 1969); J.H. Bettey *Wessex from AD1000* (London 1986) 86–9.
- 9 S.R.S. *The Register of Bishop Ralph of Shrewsbury* (2 vols.), (Taunton, 1896), i, xxv–vi.
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- ³¹ H.M.C. *Calendar* ii 561, 564-5. 580, 585, 590, 600, 606.
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