

The Story of William Kilsby (part 1)

Some years ago, whilst idly browsing the Internet, I discovered that a man named William Kilsby had held the office of Keeper of the Privy Seal under King Edward III, in the mid-1300s. This aroused my interest, because of the obvious question – did he originate from Kilsby village?

I initially dismissed this possibility – for how could a boy born in the depths of the Middle Ages, in a humble Midland village of mud huts, far removed from the centre of things, possibly have risen to become the holder of one of the most senior posts in the government of the country? The idea seemed ridiculous! ... however, it nagged away at me, until one day I decided to look in the Dictionary of National Biography (DNB), to see whether it held an entry for William Kilsby. And this is what I found ...

Extract from the DNB

William Kilsby, administrator, probably came from the village of Kilsby, Northamptonshire, though his parentage and early history are unknown. He first appears as a King's Clerk and the recipient of several church livings in the king's gift, soon after Edward III came to the throne in 1327. Kilsby was Receiver of the Chamber from January 1335 to July 1338, during which time he developed a Chamber administration that could respond quickly to the financial needs of war, and allow Edward to field armies in Scotland and France. Kilsby himself took part in the battle campaign of 1335 in Scotland, with ten men-at-arms.

Kilsby was promoted to be Keeper of the Privy Seal on 6 July 1338, when King Edward was about to embark for Flanders for his war against France. It was Kilsby who arranged for co-ordination between the administration that accompanied Edward overseas and the regency government in England, to ensure a steady flow of cash to finance the king's military ambitions. From 1338 to 1340 Kilsby had custody of both the Privy Seal and the Great Seal of England, and was Edward's closest adviser in Flanders. With his staff of six clerks, Kilsby also engaged in diplomacy as well as the duties of the privy seal, and he was promoted to the rank of banneret knight (a senior knight, permitted to display his banner on the field of battle) with a large force of men-at-arms and archers. Throughout these years Kilsby was indispensable to King Edward, not only through the offices he filled, but also through his energetic work in raising loans, standing as surety for royal debts, arranging transport, raising troops, witnessing charters, and even investigating other royal officials on the King's behalf.

1340 marked a critical turning point in Kilsby's career, however. William Melton, archbishop of York, died on 5 April. King Edward wished Kilsby to have this post, but the cathedral chapter elected William Zouche (a colleague of Kilsby, who had also held the Privy Seal for a time). Edward then wrote to the pope on Kilsby's behalf, delaying the appointment. At the same time, Edward's ambitious war campaign in France began to founder for want of funds. In April 1340 he had appointed John Stratford, archbishop of Canterbury, to be chancellor and head of the regency government in England, with the specific responsibility of raising money for the war. But the effort failed, Stratford resigned, and Edward stormed back to England in November, determined to punish the ministers whom he blamed for his financial failure. Various officials were summarily arrested, but Edward's anger focused primarily on Stratford.

Kilsby accompanied Edward on his return, then led the king's attack on the archbishop. In April 1341 he and John Darcy arraigned Stratford before the Londoners at the Guildhall and then before the Commons. The lords in parliament turned against the royal counsellors,

however, forced Kilsby and Darcy to withdraw, and gave Stratford a hearing. But the storm passed quickly. Kilsby did not lose his office, and was reconciled with Stratford in the autumn of 1341. In the winter campaign in Scotland in 1341–2, Kilsby served again as a banneret, with seven knights and fifty-three esquires.

Kilsby's hopes for high church office ended in April 1342, when Zouche was finally installed as archbishop of York. Then on 4 June Kilsby was replaced as keeper of the privy seal, ending his administrative career. However, he did not lose the king's favour, and pursued a military career for the rest of his life. He served as a banneret with a large retinue in the Brittany campaign in 1342. Afterwards, he went on pilgrimage to the holy sepulchre, and then to the shrine of St Catherine in Sinai. In 1345 he fought alongside the king at the famous battle of Crécy, with a personal force including 1 banneret, 7 knights, 73 esquires, 68 mounted archers, and 11 archers. He went on to fight at Caen, then on again to the siege of Calais, where he died somewhere between 7th and 30th September 1346.

Because of his highly visible role in the controversial finances and policy making of the initial stages of what would become the Hundred Years' War, William Kilsby attracted the opposition of some lords during the crisis of 1340–41. But his influence on Edward cannot be doubted, nor can Edward's trust in him, as one of a small group of key servants who fashioned royal policy in these years.

What a discovery!

This was stirring stuff! And moreover, it looked as though William Kilsby did after all originate from Kilsby – though the official biography does not confirm this absolutely.

Annoyingly, however, there were no details of Kilsby's early life. At the point where his official biography commences, he is already working as a King's Clerk, and probably at least 25 to 30 years old. Since he died in 1346 (probably aged about 45-50), this means that his official biography has left out over half of his entire life!

By now my curiosity was fully aroused, and I wanted to know more! I needed answers to questions that are not even posed in Kilsby's official biography. For instance:

- a) How did he become a King's Clerk?
- b) What was he doing before he rose to this position with the king?
- c) How did he come to leave Kilsby?
- d) How did he manage to gain the advanced education that he evidently received to enable him to manage all these complex affairs of state?
- e) What connections can he possibly have possessed, in order to help him to climb the greasy pole of public office?

A challenge

Here indeed was a challenge! Where could I possibly start to look?

These questions have occupied me over the last 6 months, during which I have spent scores of hours trawling the Internet, collecting and reading my way through a huge pile of historical material, visiting archives up and down the country, corresponding with other historians and archivists, and discussing with specialist historians in London, Lincoln, Oxford and elsewhere.

So – have I found complete answers to my questions?

In most cases, the answer is "yes" – I can now answer the questions that I posed above. The answers are, predictably, much longer than the questions – so I will have to break up this story into a several short instalments, in order to give you a clear picture of the history of this remarkable man, who was born in our village just over 700 years ago.

In the next instalment I will give some answers to the above questions – but to whet your appetite and give you something to think about before the next instalment appears, I will just remind you that Kilsby village had a special relationship with Lincoln cathedral for many centuries ...

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