

The Story of William Kilsby (part 2)

In the previous issue I summarised the star-studded career of William Kilsby (more properly, Sir William de Kildesby), close adviser to King Edward III in the 1330s/1340s. I then posed some basic questions that are completely ignored in his official biography:

- a) How did he become a King's Clerk?
- b) What was he doing before rising to this influential position with the king?
- c) How did he come to leave Kilsby?
- d) How did he gain the advanced education to enable him to manage these complex affairs of state?
- e) What connections did he make, to help him climb the greasy pole of public office?

I also ended Part 1 with a reminder that Kilsby village had a special relationship with Lincoln cathedral for many centuries – and this is where I take up the story again.

In 1043AD, Earl Leofric of Mercia founded a monastery in Coventry (roughly where Coventry Cathedral now stands). To fund the upkeep of this monastery, he had false charters forged, illegally claiming that he was the lord of over twenty villages including Kilsby. The deception was uncovered around 1105AD, when the lordship of Kilsby was handed back and became the property of the diocese of Lincoln (at that time a massive territory, including our present diocese of Peterborough plus much more) – so from 1105 on, the lord of Kilsby was the current bishop of Lincoln, until the Crown seized all monastic possessions at the Dissolution of Monasteries in 1539-40, when Kilsby's lordship became Crown property (but that's another story).

As the Bishop of Lincoln would have been lord of Kilsby in the 1300s, I felt my search should begin at Lincoln cathedral – and sure enough, I immediately picked up William de Kildesby's trail, for he appears in the registers of bishop Henry Burghersh (bishop of Lincoln from 1320 until his death in 1340). An entry in the bishop's registers on 15th Jan 1325 reads:

"Institution of Adam de Branby priest to vicarage of Barnetby, vacant by death of Roger de Dalton; patron, prior and convent of Newstead on Ancholme. Inquisitor and induction, dean of Yarborough. Present, Walter de Stauren, John de Wy, **William de Kildesby**."

Here then is our William de Kildesby, working as a clerk to the bishop and acting as witness to a routine piece of diocesan business. He is new to the organisation, performing minor clerical tasks and learning as he goes. We can guess that he probably journeyed up to Lincoln in the autumn of 1324 (before winter made roads impassable) and spent the closing weeks of the year finding his feet, being allocated a corner of the scriptorium floor on which to sleep, queuing for gruel in the bishop's kitchens and being taught his duties by the older clerks.

William de Kildesby appears with increasing frequency in the bishop's registers over the following years, and he rises steadily in the bishop's organisation.

This lucky piece of detective work provided answers to my first three questions above – for when Edward III came to the throne in 1327, it was bishop Burghersh whom he selected as his treasurer (in those days most government posts were filled by clerics, for they were the only available body of educated and literate administrators); and in the following year Burghersh was promoted to become Edward's chancellor, the most powerful man in the land after the king himself.

I now knew how William de Kildesby managed to enter the king's employment – in his brief

time as bishop's clerk he had clearly made himself indispensable, so that Burghersh took him to London with him. In fact Burghersh himself had served as a King's Clerk for several years prior to his elevation to Edward's side, so it would have been natural for the bishop to recommend young de Kildesby as suitable to become one of Edward's Chancery clerks. As we have already seen, William de Kildesby rose rapidly in the king's favour – he was given more and more responsibility, and was also showered with church livings that were in the king's gift, to provide the funds to maintain his ever-wealthier lifestyle as a trusted royal administrator and diplomat.

Incidentally, in the early 1330s the king's correspondence begins to mention one Robert de Kildesby, also a King's Clerk. I felt certain that this must be a close relation of William de Kildesby – and sure enough I eventually discovered (in a document dated July 1341 in the Calendar of Papal Registers, of all places!) a letter from the pope stating clearly that William and Robert de Kildesby were brothers.

At this point, I still had not answered the last two questions that I posed above. But the answers were about to be revealed ...

Having established the link between William de Kildesby and bishop Henry Burghersh, I glanced through the list of previous bishops of Lincoln, where I saw that Burghersh's immediate predecessor was bishop John de Dalderby (bishop of Lincoln from 1300 until his death in 1320). This was another lucky piece of detective work, for I already knew from previous research that during the childhood of William and Robert de Kildesby in the early 1300s the priests in Kilsby were:

1305-1316: John, son of Alan de Dalderby

1316-1334: Robert de Dalderby

(Incidentally, the priest who took over from Robert de Dalderby in 1334 was William's brother, Robert de Kildesby! – but more of this later)

These two priests were probably relatives of bishop Dalderby. I also discovered that bishop Dalderby was renowned for his insistence that priests should be well educated.

Searching at Lincoln through the records of bishop Dalderby and his predecessor Bishop Oliver Sutton, I found two further pointers:

- a) Bishop Dalderby and bishop Sutton had passed as fit for the priesthood many young men who were educated at Daventry Priory.
- b) Bishop Dalderby's itineraries took him to Kilsby on an amazing eleven occasions in the period 1305-1319 – often staying in Kilsby for several days, and on one occasion for eleven days. By contrast, he visited no other local villages, and even Daventry Priory was only visited twice. It was obvious that the two de Dalderby priests at Kilsby were close relatives of the bishop.

The final piece of the puzzle is environmental rather than theological. The early 1300s were beset by misfortune – failed harvests due to continuous rainfall through 1315-16 during which 15% of all peasants died, followed by sheep and cattle epidemics in 1317-18, resulting in the death of livestock and plough-oxen, so that fields went unploughed even after the floods dispersed. The life of peasants at this time would have been unimaginably hard, with Death a constant spectre at every man's hearth.

It is not difficult to combine these snippets of information into a connected tale, with the following key elements:

- William and Robert are born around 1295-1300, in our little village of mud huts.

- They are highly intelligent, and their parents realise there may be a chance for them to escape the dangers of a peasant's life, by training for the priesthood and finding a better life as educated clerics or secretaries.
- Luckily their village priest (who is responsible for their earliest schooling) is closely related to the powerful bishop of Lincoln – William and Robert are almost certainly chosen to wait on the bishop during his visits to Kilsby.
- Through the influence of priest and bishop, the boys are offered a chance of higher education by the monks of Daventry Priory; we can imagine them walking to Daventry and back every day, reciting their lessons on the way.
- The famines and epidemics of the 1310s only strengthen their determination to escape the peasant life – their parents may well have died during these hard times; education is their only chance to escape grim poverty and early death.
- From Daventry Priory, they gain a "dimissory" note from the bishop certifying that they have passed an oral examination in Latin and are sufficiently educated to proceed to "minor holy orders".
- By now (c1320-22) they are street-wise and hardened opportunists, ready to make the most of any chance that presents itself.
- William, the elder, has developed a talent for pleasing his masters; through the continued influence and patronage of the Dalderbys, he is offered a place in the clerical organisation of bishop Burghersh.

The rest of William's career has already been summarised, in the first part of this story and in the text above.

This might seem to be the end of the tale. However, I have not yet given you a very clear picture of William and Robert de Kildesby, other than saying that their grim early years made them into street-wise opportunists. There is much more to tell – tales of kidnap, forgery, threats and blackmail, rivalry and enmity, pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and stories of battle with William's banner proudly flying beside the king's standard at Crecy in 1546. Moreover, you have yet to make the acquaintances of Alexander, Walter, John and Thomas de Kildesby ...

... so I will tell you about that in Part 3.

Gren Hatton,
Nov 2010