

The Story of William Kilsby (part 3)

In previous issues I have sketched an overall picture of the life and career of Sir William de Kildesby, and filled some gaps in his official biography. You now have a fairly clear idea of how he grew up, where he probably gained his education, and how he and his brother Robert got their first foothold on the slippery steps to wealth and power.

I have expressed the view that their grim early years made William and Robert de Kildesby into street-wise opportunists, and hinted at dark passages in their histories. It is now time to explore these aspects in more depth, and draw them forth from the mists of time, as men with unique characters and capabilities.

Robert de Kildesby

Robert first appears as acolyte priest at Thurleigh in 1333, from where he was transferred to Kilsby church in January 1334. He was probably already working as a King's Clerk by 1336, recommended by his elder brother William and with the patronage of Edward III's chancellor Bishop Burghersh, who had already given William his powerful support – for Robert was rapidly promoted to the incomes of the churches of Essendon, Bayford and Geddington in 1337 under the patronage of Edward's mother Queen Isabella, and was granted the further income of Swineshead later in the year. Incidentally, a certain Alexander de Kildesby also appears in 1337, admitted priest to the vicarage of Caistor through the patronage of William de Kildesby (who was prebend of Caistor) – Alexander was probably related to William and Robert, perhaps their younger brother.

Robert rose rapidly – by 1340 we see him in Antwerp on the King's business, and he was granted further benefices in Lichfield and Southwell dioceses to cover his increasing expenses. However, in 1342 Robert was convicted of fraudulently forging papers in the King's name purporting to grant him further church income in York diocese, showing that he was both devious and mercenary.

What stands out, time and again, is the role played in this era by kinship, patronage and loyalty. We have seen how Bishop Burghersh's patronage of William and Robert set them on the path to power; and reading between the lines of the official records it is clear that William and Robert constantly acted to support each other as Chancery clerks.

William's power struggles

William's powers had grown throughout the latter 1330s – he was routinely given authority to hold inquisitions upon state ministers and senior lords (which doubtless made him enemies in high places), to investigate and punish thefts and embezzlements of the king's property, to raise taxes throughout the kingdom and so on; he seemed to be everywhere – one minute in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, the next in the Welsh marches, back in London, then off to Norwich to sail for Antwerp, at a continuing breakneck pace. By now he had his own extensive staff of clerks and body servants, in addition to bailiffs and local servants looking after his many possessions around the kingdom.

However, in 1340/1 William's ambitions suffered a fatal blow. Ordered by the king to prosecute Stratford for his failure to raise essential funds for Edward's wars in France, William fell foul of those lords whose enmity he had already aroused, and the lords sided with Stratford. On the surface the affair appeared to blow over quickly; but though William's enemies might smile upon him still, as politicians have always done, he had now aroused serious opposition. Only thirty years removed from the peasant's hovel, he can have had few real friends at court.

Worse was to come, and in the same year. We saw in Part 1 that William coveted the archbishopric of York, which the king had promised him, but that it was granted at the last minute by the clergy of York to ambitious William Zouch, in what was doubtless a subtle piece of political manoeuvring. Zouch lost no time in getting himself ratified as dean and archbishop-elect, and set off for Avignon to receive the pope's seal on his promotion ... and here William and Robert de Kildesby made another fatal blunder. Avoiding the war-zones of France, Zouch travelled to Avignon via the Netherlands and Switzerland – where he was kidnapped near Geneva to prevent him from reaching Avignon. Kildesby's hand in this was widely suspected, and though he took care to avoid any traceable connection, the mud probably stuck. A letter dated December 1340 from the pope at Avignon states "... that when on the 10th of the month [Zouch] was on his way to the pope about the election to the see of York, he was set upon in the neighbourhood of Geneva [by men] who dragged him and those with him off to a solitary place across the lake of Lausanne ... and that he was there despoiled and held to ransom". As if this were not enough, the pope then sent an envoy to London requesting "... Robert, brother of William de Kildesby to appear at the papal palace, and the messenger, on his arriving at London, was seized, by order of the said William and Robert, and thrust fettered into a dark prison, and although the king ordered him to be released, William and Robert, by false representations, accusing him of a homicide, which they said he had committed in those parts, obtained a writ from the king's court ordering him to be detained ...".

The brothers were getting out of their depth.

William's later career

With powerful enemies such as archbishops Zouch and Stratford and the lords in general, William's fall was inevitable, even with Edward's support. It is clear that Edward still valued him, and wished to retain his services – but there was little scope now for William as a politician; he made a short pilgrimage to the Holy Land to allow tempers at home to cool, then left the church and pursued a military career for the rest of his life. As we saw in Part 1, he served in many campaigns in England, Scotland and France, and raised his banner alongside Edward's in battle. But a warrior's life holds more tangible dangers than those of a politician, and he died shortly after the battle of Crecy, probably of wounds inflicted in that conflict.

Robert de Kildesby clung to political power for a while, but without William's support his career was limited, and he died in 1351 without attaining William's dizzy heights, though he was probably comfortable enough.

The other de Kildesbys

We have met William, Robert and Alexander de Kildesby; it is now time to make the acquaintance of four other de Kildesby men of the same era who also rose to positions of influence in the wider world:

- **Walter de Kildesby:** defence attorney in 1348 to John de Stratford, archbishop of Canterbury (ironically, William de Kildesby had prosecuted Stratford in 1340 at the king's command!); attorney to an archbishop was a position of great responsibility.
- **John de Kildesby:** a monk, appointed in 1352 as custos (warden) of the hospital or hermitage of St Mary Magdalene by Sherburn in Elmet, just north of Pontefract. By 1360 he had long deserted his post and was replaced. The Black Death devastated England in 1348-9, and by the mid-1350s the hospital was a centre for plague victims, which probably explains why John de Kildesby ran off!
- **Thomas de Kildesby:** presented in 1355 to the vicarage of Stoke Curcy in the diocese of Bath and Wells.
- **William de Kildesby jun:** granting a commission of oyer and terminer (an

investigative court) in 1353, King Edward nominated among the junior commissioners one William de Kildesby. Since "our" William died in 1346 this is clearly another man – and he would probably have been about 20 years younger than "our" William. It is tempting to suspect that he may have been a son of Sir William de Kildesby.

It is likely that all these men gained their positions of power as a consequence of William de Kildesby's influence.

Status of Kilsby village

As the birthplace of this group of men, and the former seat of priests with family connections to the bishop of Lincoln, Kilsby's status during the mid to late 1300s may have rivalled or even exceeded that of Daventry; and the reflected glow of status probably persisted until the end of the century.

Kilsby was converted into a prebendary of Lincoln Cathedral in 1380AD, to allow the bishop to add it to the stipend of his Precentor. The first Vicar of Kilsby, William Sherman, was appointed in 1386 but had to wait to take possession of the living until 1390, when 27.5 acres of arable glebe were set aside for the vicar, plus the 'small tithes'. A vicarage house was built at the SE of the churchyard, plus a prebendal house for the Precentor's duty visits – probably in the grounds of the present Kilsby Hall alongside Church Walk. A glebe terrier of 1650 by Cromwell's Commissioners describes: '*All that Prebend howse in Kildesbye built of rough Stone and covered with Thatch, wherein is a hall, Kitchin, fowre Chambers, being five baies of building; There is a barne and stables nyne baies with two gardenes and grasse Yarde, and Two fold yardes.*' So the prebend house built in 1390AD was still habitable in 1650AD, and this description tallies with the layout adopted in the fourteenth century.

In a previous article in the Kronickle I described the rare and prestigious Penn-tiled floor installed in Kilsby church in the 1390s. As I consider these events – construction of a prebend house, provision of a tiled floor for the church – it seems very likely to me that these 'status' structures erected in Kilsby in the late 1300s were probably a long-term consequence of the fame brought to our village by the de Kildesby men whose histories I have described in these articles.

Men of talent

Here we are, finally, at the end of the story. William and Robert de Kildesby were men of dazzling talent, destined to rise far above the humble hut in which they were probably born in Kilsby in the 1290s. It would be wrong to judge them by today's society values, for they were shaped by the age in which they lived – and if they appear to us ruthless and self-seeking, violent, deceitful and thieving, it is because they grew up in a world in which poverty, famine and early death could only be balanced by patronage, loyalty, and a strong right arm.

Gren Hatton,
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