

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_churchman\\_os.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php)

## The Bath and Wells Millenary Celebration.

BY THE REV. C. HALDON, A.K.C.

THE Churchman who reflects on the history of the Bath and Wells Diocese may be pardoned if he reflects with pride, and if he declines, on the strength of it, to take a gloomy view of the future. It is an illustrious record of saints, statesmen, and martyrs, and, moreover, it is to all intents and purposes the story of the English people.

The very choice of Wells as the seat of the bishopric, doubtless because of its secular Canons, recalls the influence of the monastic houses.

The removal of the see to Bath, under John of Tours, is an echo of the Norman Conquest. King John's resistance to the Pope brings penalties to Bishop Jocelyn. The Bishop of the diocese is to the fore in meeting the distress of the Great Plague in 1349.

The revival of learning sees the foundation of Taunton and Bruton Grammar Schools. The suppression of the monasteries is marked by the deaths of the Abbot of Glastonbury and some of his monks.

The Cromwellian revolt causes Archdeacon Piers to earn a living by threshing. Wesley and Whitefield are found preaching in some of the churches.

So one might go on almost indefinitely, and, in fact, Mr. J. R. Green is said to have contemplated an English history based on the records of Somerset, so clearly did he see the leading part the diocese had played in the history of our country.

Chief among the men of the diocese must ever rank Dunstan, born at Glastonbury in 925. His father was a rich man, and his uncle Bishop of the diocese. As Abbot of Glastonbury, and afterwards Archbishop of Canterbury, his influence was as holy as it was immense.

Another ecclesiastical statesman connected with the diocese was Archbishop Laud, made Bishop of Bath and Wells in 1626.

Laud was offered a Cardinal's hat, and in reply said: "My answer was that somewhat dwelt within me which would not suffer that till Rome was other than it is."

Cardinal Wolsey, the famous Minister of Henry VIII., and advocate of the divorce of Catharine of Arragon, was another occupant of the see. Henry's companion in the destruction of the monasteries, Thomas Cromwell, was Dean of Wells.

The saintly Hugh of Avalon, Bishop of Lincoln, was at one time Prior of Witham.

Among all the men of the county, none occupies so deservedly a high place as Bishop Ken, author of "Glory to Thee, my God, this night" and "Awake, my soul." We are told he had to borrow money to enter the See of Bath and Wells. Poor as he was, Ken resisted the Monarch, and suffered for it. He was one of the seven Bishops who refused to read in church the "Indulgence to Dissenters" of the Romanizing James. They were committed to the Tower, and eventually acquitted, to the satisfaction of the community, and, to their immortal credit be it said, of some of the leading Dissenters. On the accession of William and Mary, Ken was unable to subscribe the oath, and took with him into retirement the £800 which represented his total property. He passed away in 1711, declaring that he died in the communion of the Church of England, "free from all Papal and Puritan innovations."

The naval heroes of Somerset are Blake, Dampier, and the two Hoods; nor must we forget Sir William Parry, the Arctic explorer, and Speke, the discoverer of the source of the Nile.

The diocese stands high, too, in its record of scientific men, but space forbids more than a passing mention of Roger Bacon, the first of English scientists, John Locke, and Thomas Young, who were all born in Somerset.

Nor is the county behind in literary history. Gildas, the earliest British historian, rests at Glastonbury; Coleridge, the author of "The Ancient Mariner," wrote most of his famous poems at his cottage at Nether Stowey; Hallam, the friend of Tennyson, is buried at Clevedon; Daniel, the Elizabethan poet,

was born near Taunton ; Kinglake, the historian, comes from the same neighbourhood ; and Fielding, the novelist, was another Somerset man. Hannah More, the friend of Dr. Johnson, and William Wilberforce are names for ever associated with the Wrington Valley.

So one might proceed almost indefinitely with the list of Somerset worthies. The hills and valleys of Somerset ring with the praises of its famous sons. Something of its exquisite beauty which Coleridge praised, its wooded slopes, its verdurous vales, seems to have engraved itself on the minds of its children, and fine ideals and noble aspirations born of their surroundings have spurred them to words and works which the world will never permit to die.

But Somerset is, if anything, even more noted for its churches. The millenary of the bishopric may well form an occasion for a brief notice of these. Freeman said : " The churches of Somerset take precedence of all specimens of parochial architecture in the kingdom." One reason for this seems to be an abundance of superior and workable stone : the Taunton, Doulling, and Draycott stones are to the point. The further question as to why the churches belong to one period practically is not easy to answer. Mr. Hunt, in his history of the diocese, does not attempt it, to my knowledge. May we not say that it has some connection with the great revival of learning ? The various events of the period—the discoveries of Columbus, Cabot's journey from the port of Bristol to explore the West, the discoveries of Copernicus—all tended to awaken new interests in the minds of men ; while the invention of printing and the works of More and Erasmus were giving a new impetus to the study and practice of religion. This latter was no doubt, as it has been said, the main effect of the new learning on English minds. It effected not merely a change of morals, or intellectual attitude, but became, under the guidance of Colet, and with the support of King, Bishops, and clergy, nothing short of a revival of religion. This revival found a large number of Somerset churches in decay. Nearly every

church in the diocese was remodelled, and in some cases rebuilt. The revival of architecture in this Perpendicular period gave Somerset its noble towers—erections which are often quite out of proportion to the rest of the church, because the tower was built before anything was done to the other parts. Many writers have made many divisions and classifications of the towers, and I do not propose to make another or discuss the merits of the rest. I think it is Freeman who divides them into three classes. First, the tower divided into three stages, with the turret at one corner, connected with the buttresses. This class includes St. Mary, Taunton, described by Macaulay as “a graceful tower,” which was rebuilt in 1862, and is remarkable for its height; HUISH EPISCOPI, of which Mr. Piper says: “From pinnacle to base the tower is without a flaw”; Bruton, and the fine Bishop’s Lydeard, which, if not grander, is older than Taunton. Secondly, come towers like Banwell, Dundry (on the beacon-hill overlooking Bristol), and Bleadon, in which the stair-turret is a prominent feature; and thirdly, the highest class, such as St. Cuthbert, Wells, and Wrington, in which the whole upper part is treated as one panelled stage. Of Wrington, Freeman says: “It is the finest square tower not designed for a spire or lantern in all England, and therefore, possibly, in the whole world.”

Bath Abbey, a good example of late Gothic, has been called “The Lantern of England,” on account of the size and number of its windows. Externally, the eye is at once attracted to the massive tower, so familiar to Great Western travellers, and the splendid flying buttresses. The quaint west front, representing figures climbing the ladder of heaven, is the result of Bishop Oliver King’s dream, who is said to have had a vision similar to the patriarch Jacob, and which resolved him to rebuild the fabric. Later on, at the dissolution of the monasteries, the abbey fell into decay, and it was left for the nineteenth century to restore the stately edifice where Eadgar was crowned.

Glastonbury Abbey, in whose grounds part of the Millenary Celebration is to take place this month, in the presence of the

Prince and Princess of Wales, is probably the one important link in all Britain between the Christianity of to-day and the earliest missionary effort.

Legends, of course, cluster round the ruins of Glastonbury, serving at least to point to some church here before the Saxon Conquest. Later records help to confirm the opinion "that in the larger part of the Diocese of Bath and Wells the worship of Christ was never displaced by the worship of Woden." It was in the time of Edward I., who, with his Queen, visited the place in great state, that the buildings of Glastonbury drew near to completion. The splendour of the place can be realized to some extent by the report of Henry VIII.'s Commissioners that the buildings were "mete for the King's Majesty and no man else." In the reign of Mary a proposal to rebuild came to nothing, and later on we find Monmouth and his men encamping in the ruins. Ruins they remain to-day. The abbey and its grounds were private property until, thanks to Dr. Kennion, the liberality of the owner, and the public spirit of Englishmen from the King downwards, they passed into the keeping of their rightful owner—the National Church of the country.

We turn for a little to the chief church of the diocese, the ancient structure nestling at the foot of the Mendips, the centre of "a group of buildings which, as far as I know, has no rival either in our own island or beyond the sea" (Freeman, "Cathedral Church of Wells"). There is a wealth of material to the archæologist in the city of Wells: the quaint market-place, with its fountain, the old inns, the "matchless Vicars' Close"; but we must confine ourselves to the cathedral, which, with its appurtenances, are, as has been said, not only the central feature of the place, but the very place itself. "The whole history of Wells is the history of its bishopric and of its Church."

That there was a church here when the bishopric was founded there can be little doubt, but all traces of it have ceased to exist. Bishop Jocelyn, who signed the Great Charter as Bishop of Bath and Glastonbury, was the great builder of Wells in the early part of the thirteenth century, and to him we owe

at least the nave, transepts, choir, and parts of the three towers. Whether he was his own architect, as William of Wykeham at Winchester, and other famous ecclesiastics, we cannot say. It has been pointed out that there are signs that the work was at least begun by local hands, but there is no doubt that Jocelyn was the inspiring force, and helped liberally with the funds. In the fourteenth century, with the tendency of the day, we got the east end and the Ladye Chapel. About the same time, owing to the raising of the tower, the peculiar inverted arches appeared, to give strength to the piers, and later on the west towers. The west front, with its beautiful sculptures, is said to be Bishop Jocelyn's work; it exceeds in breadth, I am told, those of Amiens and Notre Dame.

Wells is not a large cathedral, and must be compared, not with Canterbury and York, but with churches like Hereford and Beverley. But there is a peculiar character and beauty in the nave, where, owing to the main lines being horizontal rather than vertical, "there is no nave in which the eye is so irresistibly carried eastward as in that of Wells." The cathedral and adjuncts escaped the hard treatment of Henry VIII.'s reign. The see was plundered afterwards, but much was regained. Wells owes its freedom from danger to the fact of its secular foundation. We are thankful. The place is a whole link with the past. It breathes another day and generation. In Wells we are in an unbroken company of Christian priests and people from the Norman Conquest to our own time. It is all one with the varied history of the diocese. Legends, stones, and records, unite to proclaim to us the final victory of Christ. The very ruins of Glastonbury are a sermon. To those who resisted its destruction, its defence was the defence of the Gospel. They died in that defence as the martyrs of Uganda died in our own lifetime for a witness to the faith. The witness to truth can never be dispensed with. It is ours, in the changed and ever-changing circumstance of to-day, to step into the heritage of our fathers, bear our witness to the faith, and, like them, perpetuate it.