

# Some Bampton Letters of the Late Fifteenth and Early Sixteenth Century

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## SUMMARY

*In the archive of the Dean and Chapter of Exeter cathedral there remains a small collection of letters which concern the administration of the properties and revenue of the church of Bampton, Oxfordshire, during the late 15th and early 16th century. Although none of these letters is dated by year, merely by day and month, approximate years may be hazarded in many instances by the use of internal evidence. They were written during the last three decades of the 15th century and in one or two cases during the first decade of the 16th century. All are written in English and most have suffered some wear and damage, but they are sufficiently well preserved for it to be possible to understand at least the gist and in many instances the entirety of what the correspondents write. Three of the letters are of particular interest and merit a full transcription. The remaining seven are summarized here.<sup>1</sup>*

Bampton church and its rectory estate, later the manor of Bampton Deanery, were given to Exeter cathedral in the mid 11th century. As with the cathedral's possessions in Devon, Cornwall and Dorset, the property was administered by a local bailiff who was answerable to a supervisor at the central exchequer of the Chapter in Exeter. Despite being something of a solitary outlier to Exeter's south-western estates, Bampton was no mean possession. As a former minster the church held parochial rights over a broad stretch of southern Oxfordshire that comprised a collection of villages and hamlets set between the shallow valleys of the Thames and Windrush.<sup>2</sup> A reflection of Bampton's earlier status as a mother church remained both in its anomalous three vicars, who like minster-priests provided the church with a team, each taking a third portion of the vicarage revenues, and in its several dependent chapels in neighbouring villages and manor houses. Chaplains and rectors might serve in them but their tithes and oblations all went to the mother house. Over the centuries Bampton church fiercely contested encroachments upon its ancient rights, especially over matters of tithes and burials. Also drawing income from this mixed sheep, cattle and arable country were – as several of the letters make clear – the earls of Shrewsbury, whose family from the 14th century had held the other chief Bampton manor.

Letters – even of a business nature, as most medieval letters were – are at times more vivid and more personal than official documents. Often it is only their opening and

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Dr. John Blair for drawing these letters to my attention and for his and Dr. Simon Townley's invaluable assistance in their editing.

<sup>2</sup> John Blair, 'Parish versus Village: The Bampton-Standlake Tithe Conflict of 1317–19', *Oxfordshire Local History*, ii, 2 (1985), 36.

closing phrases which fall into the formulaic and their busy particularity ensures that they are usually not bland or vague. These Bampton letters are of interest at two levels. First, at a general level they reflect the prevailing economic climate of the time. With its low and stagnating population and agricultural depression, the 15th century was a difficult time for many landlords. They responded with an almost universal retreat from the direct exploitation of their estates. They very often simplified the collection of their revenues, commuting services and renders in kind into money payments, and minimised their activities to those of rent collection. At Bampton the demesne was leased by c. 1398, and during the 15th century the Dean and Chapter withdrew from the direct administration of their tithes of corn, sheep, wool, cattle and milk, young pigs, fish, ale and pigeons,<sup>3</sup> leasing them to bailiffs, vicars and others. It was a time when the retention of tenants and collection of rents could become a matter of anxiety for manorial officials. In these letters the bailiffs at Bampton make mention of tithes in arrears, tithes that have fallen in value and tithes that must be bargained over with stubborn buyers who threaten their neighbours in order to maintain solidarity about keeping the price of the tithes down.

Secondly, these are social documents which offer sharp visual images of local life: burial processions struggling along the muddy road between Shifford and Bampton; irate tenants riding up to London; the abbot of Eynsham allegedly offering bribes to sway old men's memories. They also betray some of the attitudes and assumptions of the time. Here we can observe a society of increasing literacy that yet still honoured oral testimony; in which an institution such as a cathedral might guard its interests by a search of government records but yet find its best guarantee of prosperity in the far more inscrutable calculations of good lordship exercised by local gentry and royal master.

*Dean and Chapter of Exeter, MS. 3498/31*<sup>4</sup>

A letter from John Arundel, Dean of Exeter, to his chapter in Exeter. The letter must therefore date from between 1483 and 1496, the years when Arundel held the deanery of Exeter. In 1496 he was elevated to the bishopric of Lichfield and Coventry and in 1502 became bishop of Exeter.<sup>5</sup> Two matters arise concerning Bampton. Arundel is vexed that tenants of the earl of Shrewsbury at Bampton are preventing the Dean and Chapter's farmer there from having free access onto a common with his sheep. He has written accordingly to the earl. At this date the earl of Shrewsbury was George Talbot (d. 1538). The common was possibly Lew heath, north of Bampton (part of Lew being included in the earl's manor), where in 1318 a predecessor of the earl had challenged the Dean and Chapter but finally acknowledged their rights there as appurtenant to their demesne, though their tenants were excluded.<sup>6</sup>

Additionally, whilst recently at Bampton, Arundel was requested by the inhabitants of Chimney and Shifford that they might have a separate burial ground at Shifford

<sup>3</sup> D.J.B. Hindley, 'The Economy and Administration of the Estates of the Dean and Chapter of Exeter Cathedral in the Fifteenth Century' (London Univ. M.A. thesis, 1958), 143-4; Dean and Chapter of Exeter, MSS. 5100-6; 6016/2/1-3.

<sup>4</sup> In transcribing the letters I have extended words in accordance with abbreviation marks in the originals; erased errors have been silently omitted and no additional punctuation supplied.

<sup>5</sup> Le Neve, *Fasti Ecclesiae Anglicanae 1300-1541: IX: Exeter* (1964), 5; *Dictionary of National Biography*, ii (1885), 146.

<sup>6</sup> Dean and Chapter of Exeter, MS. 644.

chapel on account of the inconvenience created by the distance to Bampton and the difficulties of the muddy road.<sup>7</sup> (This matter of the road was to be a persistent trouble: even in the 18th and 19th centuries Chimney could sometimes be cut off from Bampton by floods for several weeks.<sup>8</sup>) Having conferred with the vicars at Bampton, Arundel concludes that this would be a good arrangement, but he wants the opinion of the other members of the chapter. Later evidence shows a separate burial ground at Shifford in use, many late 16th and 17th-century wills of Shifford and Chimney inhabitants specifying their choice for burial there.<sup>9</sup>

Rygh worshippfull and my rygh enterely welbelovyd Brederin in Cryyste I recomende me hertely to you and am rygh desirous to heere off youre wellfare and off the prosperous state off oure church whereoff I pray you thatt I may have knowledge by your wrytyng and by thys messingere and florasmoch as I may nott as yett be amongs you to your cumfoorte and the profyte off the church I pray you iff there be eny mater wherein I may doo for the honour and wele off the church or for eny off you to acertein me thereof and I shall endewour me for the goode spede thereof to my lytyll powere. Furdyrmore Brederen I thingke ye have knowlege thatt I came by bampton which apperteignyth to us as I came from london in the yende off the laste terme apon a compleinte made unto me by oure fermer there for thatt he is lettyd off hys wey to a comyn with his shepe by the tenants off my lorde off Shrewisbery and how I dede there the vicaryys and fermor there have sende you worde and ellys I suppose ye shal have some notyte thereof att your next audyte. And apon such informacyon as I had there I have sende to my lord off Shrewisbury desyrynge hys lordshippe to wryte unto his counceill att london comaundyng them to geve attendunce to see oure tytyll and to make us a resonabill answer to the same and as I have herd late by a servante off my sayde lordys hys lordshippe entendyth to be att london this terme and I purpose by goddys grace to be there by the feste of all seints [1st November] Wherefore iff ye sende uppe oon suficyently instructyd in thatt mater wyth such evidens as apperteignyth I woll doo as moch as in me is to save the rygh off oure church. And furdyrmore att my being att Bampton above sayde the inhabitants off Chilmeley and Shifford suyd unto me for licence to have there beryall att Shifford for somoch as they be oftyme endayngeryd and gretely anoyd for the grete distaunce and fowloness off the wey and odyr causis resunabill. In wich matter I comenyd wyth the vicarys there for oure indempnyte and therys and our successors and asfaras I can see we may doo a merytory dede yn gevyng the licence and we have discrete proutours to provide for our indempnite and the vicarys and the charge to be bourne by them. In wich mater allso I desyre to be acerteynyed off youre mynyds and this I committe the church and you my dere and welbylovyd brederin to the protection off allmyghty god etc. ffrom Herforde in haste the xiiith day off Octobre withande off youre deane and love

John Arundell

*Dean and Chapter of Exeter, MS. 3498/32*

This is another letter from John Arundel addressed to the Chapter at Exeter. It was evidently written between 1485 and 1496, those years when both Arundel was Dean at Exeter and Henry VII was on the throne. In December 1483 – the year which had seen a West Country rebellion and the attainder of Bishop Courtenay of Exeter – Arundel had been in need of a pardon from Richard III, but he was to be an assiduous royal servant to the Tudor regime.<sup>10</sup> For example, in 1491 he would be found in Chester busy raising money to fight the French.<sup>11</sup> This letter shows the Dean to be delighted at having had a quarter of a forced loan repaid to the cathedral by the king, but all of a fluster that the Chapter should not offer any offence in response to the queen's wish to have at her

<sup>7</sup> This letter is discussed by S. Crawford, 'The Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Chimney, Oxfordshire', *Oxoniensia*, liv (1989), 55–6, as evidence that Chimney's 10th/11th-century cemetery had been abandoned by the 15th century.

<sup>8</sup> Dean and Chapter of Exeter, MS. 2019; J.A. Giles, *Hist. of Bampton* (1848), 87.

<sup>9</sup> Oxon. R.O., MSS. Wills Oxon., Shifford and Chimney wills, *passim*.

<sup>10</sup> *Calendar of Patent Rolls 1476–85*, 374.

<sup>11</sup> *Calendar of Patent Rolls 1485–94*, 354.

disposal the gift of the next office of vicar that should become vacant at Bampton. She seeks this favour on behalf of Sir Roger Cotton, the master of her horses, a knight of the body and stalwart Tudor supporter. Cotton was the man Henry VII had entrusted with the keeping of Cardiff castle at the time of his accession.<sup>12</sup> In April 1487 Cotton received income out of Oxfordshire, but not from Bampton, when he was granted an annuity of £40 out of the issues of the manors of Stretley and Fyfield.<sup>13</sup> It was clear to Arundel that to please Queen Elizabeth was in the best interests of the cathedral 'for she may doo us goode' and act as 'protector and guide in all oure works'. It was presumably such a will to oblige and survive, expressed here in these circumspect tones, that ensured Arundel's promotion in 1496 to the office of bishop.

Ryghth worshippfull and my enterely welbilovyd brederin in Cryyste I recomende me unto you yn as hertye maner as I kan sore longginge to be amonge you for a season howbeit as yett I may nott butt I truste hastyly to have a leisure too accomplysh my desyre there. Brederin I have so endevoryd me thatt I have receyvid for us off the kinge 1 marke [50 marks] in full payment off the prest off CC li. [£200] which his grace had off us this tyme twelvemonth the which sune ys yn pens and redy to be sende to you by eny sure messinger thatt I kan gete. And iff ye woll thatt I shall deliver itt to eny off the Caryers or to eny odyr man thatt woll pay you sendyth me a bill and hitt shalbe deliveryd withoute fayle or delay. I truste ye bee contentyd off the C marke [100 marks] which master Thomas Eliott lefte with me yn Trynyte terme and ellys I have evyll officers there. Moreover the quenys grace hath wrytyn unto us at the instance off sir Rogger Cotyn which is maister off her horsis and I am gretely laboryd to wryte unto you also for the nexte avoydance off eny off oure vicarrages off Bampton yn Oxfordshire I am so moch bounde to the quenys grace thatt I moste pray and beseche you to tendyr and fare this her furste desire made unto us howbeit I have shewyd thatt all oure benyfyces goo bi lotte undyr such foorme as noon off us kan tell who shall geve eny benyfyce thatt shal happe to be woyde butt only he unto whois nominacyon hitt apperteynyth, notwithstanding thatt I knowell thatthois benyfyces be yn comyn wherefore I woold be ryghth glad thatt her grace were pleasid for she may doo us goode when we shalhave nede as god knowyth which bee unto protector and guide in all oure works I pray you lete me have the answeyre by wrytyng fro you yn haste to the quenys letters etc. Wrytyn haste att Grenewych the viith day off January

By youre tender lover and nott off hys myt

Dene John Arundell

*Dean and Chapter of Exeter, MS. 3498/33*

A letter from J. Kyrton, who could well be their bailiff at Bampton, to the Dean and Chapter in Exeter, written in London on 14 September. The mention made of 'my lord of Bedford' the king's uncle places the date of the letter to the period between October 1485, when Jasper Tudor, earl of Pembroke and uncle to Henry VII, was created duke of Bedford, and December 1495 when he died; whilst payments in the Dean and Chapter's account for 1494-5 of expenses involved in 'communication' with the earl of Shrewsbury over the dispute with his tenants at Bampton suggest that the letter may possibly have been written in either of these years.<sup>14</sup> The greater part of the letter is concerned with the quarrel over common at Bampton mentioned in MS. 3498/31. Kyrton reports that he and the earl's agent have been having a lively time trying to sort the matter out. Six of the earl's Bampton tenants turned up in London to make complaint of the Dean and Chapter's farmer and wished that the earl's agent would write on their behalf not only to Shrewsbury himself but also to the duke of Bedford as holder of a third portion of the disputed common, and they made threats about throwing down the farmer's fences in

<sup>12</sup> J.D. Mackie, *The Earlier Tudors 1485-1558* (1952), 57.

<sup>13</sup> *Calendar of Patent Rolls 1485-94*, 172.

<sup>14</sup> Dean and Chapter of Exeter, MS. 3754, f. 121v.

Bampton. Faced with this show of belligerence Kyrton recruited the aid of the earl's agent in the task of mollifying the six. They adjourned to a tavern 'and y payed for the wyne' after which the tenants were set back upon the road home 'with as feyre wordys as y coude thyng to pasifye them of there wilfull mynde'. The document is torn and the subsequent account becomes unclear but it would appear that there was a further dispute between the Dean and Chapter and the earl of Shrewsbury over a piece of ground at Bampton. Finally, Kyrton had been instructed to search in the exchequer to discover just what sum the Dean and Chapter's tenants at [Brize] Norton should be paying as a fifteenth, the usual tax. (By the late 15th century the fifteenth had become a fixed charge attached to particular landholdings.) He has discovered that they should pay no more than 19s.: they have been paying 10s. more than was due.

*Dean and Chapter of Exeter, MS. 3498/34*

A letter addressed to the Dean and Chapter at Exeter by William Newman, bailiff at Bampton. He is known to have held that office in 1497-8 but is likely to have occupied it over a period of years.<sup>15</sup> He writes to announce that the Dean and Chapter's steward Master Crofts has died and that (in his opinion) he could be replaced by no one better than Sir Robert Harcourt, 'a right welle disposed gentilman'. The Harcourts of Stanton Harcourt were influential local gentry who for the greater part of the 15th century served the county as sheriffs, JPs and escheators.<sup>16</sup> The desirability of a connection with the family had already been recognised by the earls of Shrewsbury whom Richard Harcourt, kt., had served during the 1470s as steward of their lands in Bampton and elsewhere.<sup>17</sup> The duties of the cathedral's steward at Bampton were light. His task was to provide some nominal supervision of the running of the manor and, in theory, to preside over four courts annually.<sup>18</sup> In practice the courts met even more infrequently: sometimes two or three times a year. For his trouble the steward received an annual sum of £2 and all expenses incurred in holding the courts. Quite as important as the holding of courts was, of course, the backing and protection such a man could offer the cathedral's interests in Oxfordshire.

The other business of Newman's letter is his inability to collect the pension and rent owed by Master Woode who is at variance with 'my lord Bysshop' – perhaps the bishop of Exeter. William Woode was vicar of the north vicarage at Bampton 1500-22.

*Dean and Chapter of Exeter, MS. 3498/35*

Another letter addressed to the Dean and Chapter from William Newman, bailiff at Bampton. The king – who internal evidence suggests is Henry VII – has had proclamation made at diverse market towns that all manner of silver should be rendered up to raise money. It is possible that this was the subsidy of 1497, imposed to finance war against Scotland. The bailiff awaits instruction as to whether he should pay at once such money as is required or tarry until the king, who is in the district, has gone and then gather such money as the Chapter instruct. Sir Robert Harcourt 'your grete officer',

<sup>15</sup> Hindley, *op. cit.* note 3, 55.

<sup>16</sup> *V.C.H. Oxon.* xii, 275.

<sup>17</sup> *Calendar of Patent Rolls 1467-77*, 400.

<sup>18</sup> Hindley, *op. cit.* note 3, 56.

that is, steward, (see MS. 3498/34) has died of the common sickness. (He is known to have died before 1509, so placing this letter in the reign of Henry VII.) Three gentlemen have approached Newman asking him to influence the Dean and Chapter on their separate behalfs for the office. He urges that they do not fill the post until such time as he has spoken to them in person and been able to 'shew yow who he is that is most worshipfullist and most for your profyzt'. William Bryan, the farmer of Bampton Deanery, has promised that when Newman next rides to the Dean and Chapter he will accompany him and pay his arrears in full. (In 1517 Bryan took up a 21-year lease of the manor house with its buildings, dovecote and demesne at Cogges.)<sup>19</sup>

*Dean and Chapter of Exeter, MS. 3498/36*

Again a letter to the Dean and Chapter from William Newman, bailiff, which can be dated to the first decade of the 16th century. Newman is ill and unable to attend the audit but he can report that the abbot of Osney has paid all his arrears. However, the abbot of Eynsham, who is also bishop of Llandaff, (Miles Salley, abbot of Eynsham before 1499 to 1516, and bishop of Llandaff 1500–16/17),<sup>20</sup> is disputing the tithe for Marsh Haddon. The abbot arranged for a jury of old men of the district to come to Brize Norton to testify as to what the custom should be in this matter. Newman alleges that the abbot had these men bribed with money to testify in his abbey's favour, greatly to their disgust. They declared that they would not witness to the tithe belonging to Eynsham abbey for all the abbot's goods. As part of this dispute servants of the abbot have carried away wheat and barley belonging to the Dean and Chapter. The bailiff has therefore had cartloads of corn carried out of that parish to greater safety. The truth of the allegation that the abbot had bribed witnesses cannot be discovered, but certainly Miles Salley knew of the cunning tactics his abbey had had to face in other such disputes. As abbot he had inherited a lively quarrel with the vicar of Wootton over the tithes of the manor of Dornford, in the earlier stages of which the then vicar had not been above recruiting 'a company of the scolers of Oxford' for an early morning raid on the harvest fields.<sup>21</sup>

Ryght Reverend and worshipfull mastys I Recomand me unto yow, and full glad to here of all your welfares the cause of my wryting is to yow at this tyme Allmyghty god hath vysite me with sykenes that I cannot come to your audite as god knoweth and alle my neyghburs my sykenes is so sore and grevous that I cannot appoynt my tyme with yow when I shalbe with yow, yf I leve as I trust to god I wylbe shortly with yow. And yf I dye I trust myne executours shalbe with yow and bring to yow your dewte and I pray yow to be good mastys to me and pray for me and I wyll pray for yowe. Mastys when I was last with yow ye desirid me to Ryde to London in youre erands. And I have sped alle your Erands I trust to your plesure I have be there ii tymes. The abbot of Oseney hath payd alle his dewtees and rerages that weryn be hynd and Costs and is glad to do yow plesure and to pay his dewtees here aftyr. And as for my lord of Landath abbot of Eynsham he puttith yow and your officers to grete Costs and Charge for he appoynted a day with Master Tame for to be at Bryndesnorton to here the . . . the old men of the contrey for the tithe of marshe haddon lyng in the ffield of bryndesnorton the whiche day was appoynted the thursday next aftyr Seynt Laurence day [10th August] and seid he wold make master Tame . . . mater the whiche aftyrward he denyed and he did send to bryndesnorton the day before the seid . . . his steward with odor moo of his Councell to wete what the Countrey wold sey in his behalf and proferid to them both gold and sylvyr for to sey aftyr his mynd and when the peple of the contrey knew and understode his mynd they seid and answerd unto his counsell that they

<sup>19</sup> P.R.O., E326/7223.

<sup>20</sup> *V.C.H. Oxon.* ii, 67.

<sup>21</sup> P.R.O., STAC 1/1/34; also concerned with this quarrel, STAC 1/2/97; STAC 2, bundle 22, no. 222; and *ibid.* C1/210/33.

wold noy sey . . . for alle the good that the abbot hath wherfore the abbot Came not there accordyng to his appoyntment . . . than master Tame kepte his day and ther the Contrey wayted uppon hym both Gentilmen and . . . and oder good husbondes suche men whos namys followen were there and seid they wolde swere uppon . . . oke wherso ever they shall that the abbottes servantes caryde a wey the whete and barly that longid to the Dene and Chaptour of Exceter: John Grey John Mason John Sym Nicholas Hopeok a old man Richard Howse . . . born in bryndsnorton and have knowen hit many yeres. Also Richard Gardenar and . . . Wynnok wyll sey the same and many mo oder yf they durst for the abbot. Master Tame comaundid [?me] to take carts and cary away the corn and ley hit in a indifferent place tyl he have ferthire communicacon . . . your mastirships I have done his commandment and caride hit out of that parisshe and leyde hit . . . haddon. No more to yow at this tyme but Jesus preserve yow all wretyn at Cogges the xxii day of Octobre

By William Newman your bayly of Bampton  
[the carrier of this letter can shew yow of my sykenes for he is my ffysicion]

*Dean and Chapter of Exeter, MS. 3498/37*

A letter from an unnamed bailiff; its torn and faded condition makes much of the document illegible. It is undated. The bailiff wishes the Dean and Chapter to 'let me have knowleche howe I shalbe ruled' in various disputes over tithes. One of the recalcitrants is a Robert Andrew who has a half acre under wheat and also some land under barley.

*Dean and Chapter of Exeter, MS. 3498/38*

An undated and anonymous memorandum enquiring whether the 20s. paid for Broadmead should be paid to the earl of Shrewsbury or to the lord of Haddon.<sup>22</sup> The writer asks that his indenture might be renewed in such a fashion that it should be void if he dies within its term of years.

*Dean and Chapter of Exeter, MS. 3498/39*

A letter to announce that the bailiff at Bampton, Thomas Lewis (who was still alive in 1475-6 according to another source) has died.<sup>23</sup> The letter is written by his son-in-law, Ralph Bull, on 26 April; the year is unknown. Bull is willing as his father-in-law's executor to fulfill Lewis's duties until the forthcoming Michaelmas, that is, until the end of the financial year.

*Dean and Chapter of Exeter, MS. 3498/40*

A letter from Thomas Lewis, the bailiff at Bampton, to the Dean and Chapter. Lewis is known to have served as bailiff during the mid 1470s, but the letter can be dated no more precisely than to say that it cannot be later than 1479. This can be deduced from the mention of John Culmere who is known to have been vicar at the north vicarage at Bampton 1452-79. The bailiff states that Culmere has paid his arrears so that only 33s. 4d. remain outstanding over and above this year's pension due to be paid at Michaelmas.

<sup>22</sup> Broadmead, part of the Dean and Chapter's demesne, was actually in Haddon, and owed 20s. quitrent to the lords of Haddon: e.g. Dean and Chapter MSS. 5100-6.

<sup>23</sup> Dean and Chapter, MS. 3754, f. 14v.



Sir William Clarke (who was vicar at the east vicarage 1451-98) is in arrears with his payments. As for the arrears of Thomas Stokys,<sup>24</sup> 'I can gete no peny there of for he encreseth not in gode and every day is more unable then othir to pay it'. The vicars of Bampton intend to rent by composition the tithe of Westweld (i.e. Weald in Bampton) which used to yield 100s. annually, but since Thomas Stokys's time it has fallen in value to £4 6s. 8d. and now they refuse it at that price unless it is further reduced, 'and yf any othir man take hit they gyff hym grete wordes and sey they will vex hym be the lawe'.

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<sup>24</sup> Stokys is mentioned with Culmere as an ex-farmer of the demesne and manor house in a lease of 1476 to Lewis and others: Dean and Chapter, MS. 6016/2/2.