

Bishop Bronescom (Walter of) c.1220-1280



In 2009, Bishop Michael of Exeter came to Chudleigh on 1st November to join in celebrating the 750th anniversary of the dedication of Chudleigh Parish Church. He must have been grateful that the journey was relatively short. In several respects, the Bishop followed in the footsteps of his predecessor, Bishop Walter Bronescombe, who dedicated the church in 1259, but there were some significant differences. One of the most obvious is that on the day of the dedication, Bishop Bronescombe would have needed to travel no further than from his palace in what is now the orchard of Palace Farm, Rock Road. That palace was one of several, distributed throughout the diocese, though would not have been as palatial as we

might at first imagine. Over 750 years, times have changed a great deal, and the differences between the life and lifestyle of a bishop then and now are a reflection of those changes.

Bishop Bronescombe was born in Exeter, and is known to have attended university, presumably Oxford. Between 1245 and 1257, he held several benefices in plurality, but he was not ordained priest until 9th March 1258. In remarkable succession to that, he was on the following day consecrated as bishop, and scarcely a month later enthroned at Exeter.

He was favoured by both the king (Henry III) and the pope, his time being, of course, two and a half centuries before the English church broke with Rome. In 1266 Bishop Bronescombe helped secure the election of the king's half brother to the bishopric of Winchester, and he continued in royal service and was a frequent visitor to France on the king's behalf until the coronation of Edward I in 1274. The bishop was apparently on good terms with Edward too, baptising his son and heir Alphonse. (Alphonse did not outlive his father, so never became king.) Bishop Bronescombe is believed to have been 'practical and conciliatory, a man who inspired confidence in those with whom he had dealings' and, notwithstanding the extent to which he was diverted by royal service, 'a vigorous and conscientious bishop, active in visiting, and often rededicating, the churches of his large diocese.

In his foreword to *The Register of Walter Bronescombe, Bishop of Exeter 1258-1280*; The Canterbury and York Society, 1995, O F Robinson writes that following Bishop Bronescombe's installation as Bishop there was an extraordinary spate of dedications carried out in 1259 and again in 1261, with a further group in Lent 1269. Twenty-seven of the fifty-two named churches or chapels are in Cornwall, two in Somerset, and the rest in Devon. Usually the notice is simply that the bishop dedicated a church; at Combeinteignhead he dedicated two altars and a high altar (*the Register says a portable altar*), at Kentisbeare three altars and a graveyard, and an altar at the chapel of Tregear. Of the 1269 dedications the register unfortunately gives no details, but records

only that the bishop dedicated many churches throughout Devon and Cornwall. The reason for all these dedications is obscure; not many of them are likely to have been new churches, though there may have been an occasional dedication to a new saint. The Council of Westminster in 1102 had prohibited the consecration of churches until all necessities had been provided for them and their priests; on the other hand, the papal legate, Ottobuono, at the Council of London in 1268, had emphatically told the bishops of the province to remedy such situations. Some may perhaps have been built and never consecrated; in others there may have been new altars; some may have been restored after tempest, fire or collapse had made them unfit for their purpose; rededication after bloodshed, or something equally sacrilegious, may explain some others.

It may be that there was some catching-up to do following the bishopric of Walter's predecessor, Richard Blund 1245-1257. Richard may have left the Diocese in a state of neglect; certainly he left it with significant debt, and scandal was created as he lay dying (quite possibly already dead) as church officers and others close to him drew up and sealed letters in his name disposing of his property and conferring benefices.

Bishop Bronescombe was not afraid of travel, transacting diocesan business from the palace in Chudleigh (24 April 1259) only four days after a spate of the same in Bishop's Nympton (near South Molton), and two days later in Paignton. He appeared to make a point of visiting all the extremities of the diocese early in his bishopric (including Bishop's Nympton, Marazion [Penzance] and Lodors [Bridport]). Perhaps some or all of those places had not seen the Diocesan bishop for some considerable time.

The timetable of dedications in autumn 1259, when the churches in both Chudleigh and Trusham were dedicated, was as follows:-

24 September to 25 October: 21 churches in Cornwall
6 November: Cheddeleg (church)
8 November: Brideford (church)
10 November: Cumb' in Tynhide (two altars and a portable altar)
17 November: St Marie, Totton (Totnes)
21 November: Trisme (Trusham)
22 November: Aiscumbe (Ashcombe)
24 November: Pouderham
26 November: St Katerine, Exon
3 December to 10 December: six churches in East Devon

Bishop Bronescombe died in Bishopsteignton in 1280 and is buried in Exeter Cathedral. With his effigy lying on top of a stone casket, his monument is one that most visitors will have noticed.

The quotations are from the Dictionary of National Biography