

St Ethelbert's chapel and the Norwich riots of 1272



Almary Green – the site of St Ethelbert's chapel,
with the Ethelbert Gate in the background

The episcopate of Roger Skerning or Scarning, 1266-1278, was an eventful period in the history of the city's parish churches under the cathedral priory's patronage. It is worth noting at the outset that Scarning had previously been prior of Norwich (and a monk before that) and that his interests were very much one with those of the Benedictine community within the Close: 'loving his monks of Norwich with great affection [he] conveyed to them many properties' (Saunders 1939, 143). A sequence of charters begins in August 1270. The earlier, on 24th of the month, is a clarification of the terms on which the parishioners of St Helen are transferred from their own church to the hospital of St Giles, across the road (Harper-Bill 2012, no. 178). The bishop notes that the parochial rights and appurtenances along the north side of the street shall remain with the master and brothers of the hospital, this excepts the cemetery of the church and the houses of the anchorite (on the south side) which the monks may remove if they wish, and that the hospital shall pay one mark annually to the priory's infirmary. Another way of putting this is that the parishioners were being evicted and the monks were to receive the churchyard and all its contents. It may be noted that on 12th August 1272 Bishop Roger clarified the constitution of the hospital

so that the prior was the prime mover in summoning those who elected a new master (Harper-Bill 2012, no. 180). Potentially less controversial was a grant on 28th August 1270 of the income from St Etheldreda's in Norwich to the cathedral refectory to take effect on the death or resignation of the incumbent rector (Harper-Bill 2012, no 172). That duly occurred in 1272 and the grant was reiterated in a charter of 2nd November (Harper-Bill 2012, no. 173). By that date, however, he had taken the extreme course of placing his own episcopal city under interdict, effectively suspending church services.

This was the outcome of disturbances between the citizens and the priory during the summer, apparently beginning around the 19th June (Tanner 1996, 259-261). On 29th June there was a thunderstorm which reportedly damaged the cathedral's spire. These two circumstances are necessary to understand the bishop's charter of 8th August 1272 (Harper-Bill 2012, no. 174) in which he notes damage caused to the chapel of St Ethelbert by wind, tumults and other tempests (*vento, tumultibus et aliis tempestatibus*). His response is remarkably elaborate: he ordains with the consent of the monks that the parishioners of St Ethelbert's (from both within and without the precinct walls) should thereafter use the church of St Mary in the Marsh and pay their tithes and other dues there rather than at St Ethelbert's. Concomitantly, the parishioners of St Mary's should relocate to St Cuthbert's. Furthermore, he has appointed Simon de Scarning as priest of St Mary's. At a stroke this decision dispossessed two communities and relocated them. The reason for this major reshuffle is probably the nature of the jurisdictions relating to the parishes. The parishioners of St Ethelbert's were apparently exempt from control by the archdeacon and the dean of Norwich, and the bishop's charter transferred the exemption with them to St Mary's. This was ratified by the archdeacon, called Thomas de Scarning, a few months later. Neither the former parishioners of St Mary's nor those of St Cuthbert's had the same privilege, so they could as it were be lumped together at St Cuthbert's which was outside the cathedral close. The context here is that the boundaries of the churchyard of St Mary's had intruded into and were surrounded by the priory's.

On 11th August, the discontent in the city erupted into very serious conflict in which thirteen people died and parts of the cathedral priory were torched. The chronicler monk, and apologist for the priory, Bartholomew Cotton in his account of the riot claimed that 'when they [the citizens] failed to gain admittance, they set fire to the main gate into the monastery, beyond which lay a certain parish church. They burned the gate and the church together with all its ornaments, books, images and contents' (Tanner 1996, 260). As the church had been in effect declared redundant three days earlier it has occurred to the editor of Bishop Scarning's charters that it is possible that this 'contributed to the resentment felt by the priory's neighbours' (Harper-Bill 2012, no.174, n.).

The consequences of the conflict were longstanding. The interdict was not lifted by the bishop until October 1275, but it was left to the archbishop of Canterbury in March 1276 to absolve those who had been excommunicated, although thirty citizens had already been hanged. Apparently deciding that there were still opportunities to enhance the priory's control in the city, in August 1276 Bishop

Scarning transferred the revenues of St Gregory's in Norwich to the use of the hostelry on the death of the current rector (Harper-Bill 2012, no. 175). Thereafter, as at St Etheldreda's, pastoral care was undertaken by a parish chaplain.

Bibliography

Harper-Bill, C. 2012. *English Episcopal Acta, 40 Norwich 1266-1288* (Oxford).

Saunders, H. W. 1939. *The First Register of Norwich Cathedral Priory*. Norfolk Record Society 11 (Norwich).

Tanner, N. 1996. 'The Cathedral and the City', in Atherton, I, et al., *Norwich Cathedral: Church, City and Diocese 1096-1996* (London 1996), 255-280.

