

John of Wheathampstead (c. 1390–1465)

The shy boy from Wheathampstead who became an international ambassador for the English church, restorer of the abbey, friend of kings and princes, man of letters, aesthete with a taste for beauty and splendour in architecture and ceremonial. With an affliction that caused him to blush, he was nevertheless an astute man of the world who knew how to raise funds for his beloved St Albans Abbey and lavished much money on its adornment.

John was born in about 1390. One of six children (three sons and three daughters), John was brought up at Mackerye End by his parents, Hugh and Margaret Bostock. Hugh Bostock was a Cheshire man and had married into the wealthy Mackery family, Margaret being heir to Thomas Mackery, lord of Mackerye End. The family name means ‘make rick’, suggesting that one of their ancestors must have been good at constructing haystacks. There is a brass in memory of Hugh and Margaret Bostock in the Lamer Chapel at St Helen’s with its Latin epitaph composed by their famous son. It translates as:

“Here lie the father, mother, sister, and brother of the pastor of the flock of the English protomartyr. His father was Hugh Bostock and his mother Margaret Macry. His name was the same; the son derives it from the father. Whoever thou art who passest by, whether man, woman, or child, pray (pecare) that, as they lie together, so they may rest in peace.”



Early days and career in the church

According to his biographer and friend John of Amersham, John’s parents, noticing that “he grew in grace and virtue”, placed him in the school of the Abbot of St Albans Abbey as soon as he was capable of being taught. The monks there “saw that he attained a proficiency in learning greatly beyond his fellow scholars”. They thought he was likely to prove “an ornament of the monastick profession”. So he entered upon his novitiate and trained as a monk.

For his further education he was sent to Gloucester Hall, Oxford (a college for monks linked to St Albans and Gloucester Cathedral that later became Worcester College). Here he met

and formed a lasting attachment for Humphrey Duke of Gloucester, brother to the future King Henry V. He rose to become the prior at Gloucester Hall and was later a generous benefactor to the college. He rebuilt the chapel there and established the library, giving it many of his own books. His first appointment after leaving Oxford was as Prior at Tynemouth Abbey in Northumberland. When he left in 1420 to take up his post at St Albans he bequeathed the monks at Tynemouth a solid gold chalice. John was twice elected abbot of St Albans abbey. His first abbacy dated from 1420 to 1440 when he resigned pleading ill health. In 1451 he was re-elected abbot and stayed as such until his death in 1465.

Archbishop's ambassador and man of the world

These were troubled times. Apart from the 100 Years War, there were two popes: Pope Eugenius IV in Rome and the antipope Benedict XIII in Avignon. Papal authority was under challenge from the kings of Europe (in particular the French) and was fighting to establish its authority. Lollardism was rampant and the Conciliar movement was aiming to run the church through a general church council. The discussion was about the nature of the church and how it should be organised. Should the pope have sole authority? Was he infallible as the chosen successor to Peter? Or was the church a congregation of the faithful with Jesus alone at its head? William of Ockham was the great English Christian humanist (died 1349) whose ideas had influenced the Conciliar movement. He had been excommunicated by the Avignon pope for heresy in 1328. A Franciscan monk, he believed that Jesus and his apostles owned no personal property and survived by begging and accepting the gifts of others. His ideas greatly influenced liberal and democratic ideas of government.

Archbishop Henry Chicheley (instituted 1414) sent John and 11 bishops to represent the English church at the Council of Pavia/Siena in 1423 (plague having broken out at Pavia, they had to adjourn to Siena). John also attended the Council of Basle in July 1431. In May that year St Joan had been burnt at the stake. Travelling across war-torn Europe must have been fraught with difficulty.

John managed to secure several advantageous papal bulls from the pope in Rome, and so impressed the pope that, when he got back to St Albans, the Bishop of Lincoln stopped his attack on the abbey's tax exemption. He must have realised that he was outranked.

Punctilious for the abbey's reputation and the behaviour of his monks

Before he left on his journey to Italy in 1423, John left a set of rules for the monks to ensure they behaved in his absence. They suggest how lax the monks' behaviour had become, or how young they were, behaving like schoolboys:

- No loitering and drink, particularly when they should be at mass;
- No chattering at the vestry door;
- No swearing or discourteous talk in the second person singular;
- No talking with women, specially no visits to the nunneries near St Albans or Redbourn without a superior's leave;
- Not to leave the choir during service in order to walk about the church and talk;

- No sitting up late;
- Frequent visits to relatives were discouraged;
- Be punctual at mass;
- Always take an adult companion when out walking;
- Visitors were not to be shown the abbey treasures without the prior's prior permission.

It was not only the monks that John sought to discipline. He also tried to control the spread of heresy.

John and heretics

In 1427 John summoned the secular clergy under his jurisdiction to a synod at St Peter's Church in St Albans and preached a sermon condemning Lollard books. He had command over nine rectories and 28 vicarages. His visitation questions at the synod were about "strange preachers" and the existence in certain parishes of persons suspected of heretical opinions and of possessing books written in the vulgar tongue. Three persons were suspected and accused.

One William Redhead, a maltster of Barnet, "infected with the noxious doctrine of Tatarigg" confessed and was sentenced to appear once a year for seven years to visit the martyr's tomb at St Albans, passing through the middle of the choir. He had to offer on the great altar a wax candle of one pound in weight; for three days after each such visit, he should pass round the churchyard every day in front of a procession, stripped of his garments. At his return to his parish church he should approach the great altar bearing a wax candle and present it to the altar on bended knee. He was also ordered to bring the said book (a Lollard tract) to the great cross and burn it to ashes with some dry faggot wood. Following this list of instructions, the Abbot apparently closed the synod in tears.

Cultivating the wealthy to preserve the abbey

John was remarkably successful in making the abbey attractive to the great and influential. This was part of his purpose of raising funds for its restoration. He was well known for "zealously collecting gifts from noble and wealthy persons" and quickly formed a Fraternity of Friends of the Abbey. At Christmas 1423 he entertained Duke Humphrey and his wife Jacqueline, with 300 retainers. They stayed until after Epiphany. It must have been quite a party, as they returned in 1426 and repeated the experience, keeping another splendid Christmas at the abbey. The Duke and Duchess of Bedford were also visitors, and arrived to celebrate the Feast of St Alban in 1426 with a train of 300 persons. Two years later, in 1428, Queen Katherine and the little king (the future Henry VI) stayed for nine days at Easter. That year 30 persons were admitted to the Fraternity. The following year 15 ladies of rank were admitted. The Earl of March, the Countess of Westmorland, and the Earl of Warwick were also visitors. Entertaining on a grand scale was clearly a good way to attract attention and funds. They were allowed to vote in chapter, but were not compelled to observe its rule.

Man of letters and patron of the arts

John was a man of letters with an obvious interest in music and literature. It is said that no other abbot wrote or caused to be written as many books for the brothers. According to the seventeenth-century historian, Chauncy, quoting from the *Liber Vitae*, the Golden Book of benefactors of St Albans Abbey, a collection of lives of the abbots and their deeds, John was:

“... very famous for his great learning, his Godly life and conversation, and his great affection to the beauty of the House of God; and he was so espoused and betrothed to it that he raised great sums of money to adorn and enrich the same, and caused our Ladies chapel to be trimmed and rarely painted with stories out of sacred writing and with verses curiously drawn in gold. He built a small chapel on the south part of the church for his burial place and caused new windows to be made and glazed in the north part of the church which was somewhat dark that it might appear more light and glorious. He also had made: several embroidered vestments for himself and his successors; a new mitre; a pastoral staff; a pure gold chalice; a pair of silver censers; a pair of silver flagons engraved with the lamb and eagle for use on the altar. He commissioned divers verses to be written to bring the people into a reverend esteem of them; also pictures of Christ, the blessed virgin, St Alban and the sacred host to be carried in procession in the cloister and to the town.”

He paid for a new organ, £50, and other organs for the abbey church in 1428 and improved the musical element of worship at the abbey by poaching two salaried singing-boys from the bishop of Durham. Moreover, he persuaded Humphrey Duke of Gloucester to give the abbey a suit of vestments worth 3,000 marks, not to mention the manor of Pembroke in south Wales.

Resentment from the envious

John managed to extract a charter of liberties from Henry VI, renewing one of Henry I, making St Albans the most valuable and privileged franchise in the land. After 20 years he became sensible that he was the object of envy.

Deeds and properties

He had a manor at Tyttenhanger for rest and recreation where he enlarged the chapel and had it painted with all the saints with his own Christian name, his own picture and this prayer: “that the unworthy He might have a place with his Name’s sakes in Heaven”. Nothing of this manor now remains, but it was near Willow Farm at Bowmansgreen off the Bell roundabout on the A5 at Ridge. The parish of Ridge was formed in the late thirteenth century of lands belonging mainly to St Albans Abbey, and the church of St Margaret there has a very fine fifteenth-century wall painting of St Christopher.

During the reign of Edward IV, John bought the manor of Agnells in Redbourn for the use of the abbey. He also rebuilt the church at Redbourn. Remembering his alma mater, Gloucester College in Oxford (now Worcester College), he erected a library there to which he gave many books, also a chapel with windows with pictures of the Crucifix, Virgin Mary and St John the Baptist. Finally, he built a new bakehouse, a model of its kind, after the

Second Battle of St Albans (1461). In total he spent £580 of his own money on various works for the benefit of the abbey. When he left in 1440, he said he was in debt to the tune of 10,500 marks.

Infirmities

When he wished to resign in 1440 (at the age of 50, if we can go by the dates) he made a long speech to the monks pleading for their understanding. He had kept secret a papal bull from Pope Eugenius permitting him to step down, but he wanted his monks' permission too. The speech was recorded verbatim by his friend John of Amersham and shows his anxieties about the loss of influence of his protectors and powerful friends, as well as awareness of his failing health.

“Such fear and trembling had affected his heart on account of the contrary chances of fortune which happen every day that it gave him more pain that pen can describe to bear rule any longer. For he was in spirit very timid. Such were his modesty and bashfulness that it was to him the greatest pain to appear in public. His delicacy was even more than that of a girl and caused his countenance to be suffused in a moment whenever it happened that he heard or saw anything ill-sounding. This troublesome infirmity caused him much trouble among his domestic staff. It was even more severe when among nobles, chiefs and magnates.”

John's retirement benefits

Wheathampstead was to surrender all the estate at Tyttenhanger, and was to receive for life Park Manor and lands in Radwell; John was to have the house near the infirmary which he had rebuilt and he might go where he pleased, except to Tyttenhanger Manor; a certain amount of plate was also allotted to him.

Sources: Gibson's *Monastery of Tynemouth* vol. II
Victoria County History

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