

## A Welsh Rector

Some 600 years ago our Bishop instituted Welshman John Blew as Rector of Binegar. The 1400s had begun and people were full of hope for the new century.

It had to be better than the last one. The 1300s were tumultuous. There was plague, death, depopulation, discontent, violence and revolt. There were power struggles between the Kings, the nobles and the Church who were all at each other's throats.



John Blew came down from Oxford University that Christmas of 1401 with his patron, our Whitchurch Prebendary, Richard Courtenay. Richard was at Oxford with John Wycliffe who shocked the Church with his radical views and translation of the Bible into English.

Archbishop of Canterbury, William Courtenay (Richard's uncle) tried to declare Wycliffe a heretic at the 1382 *Earthquake Synod*. Wycliffe's supporters, the King included, thwarted him. In 1415, however, the *Council of Constance* excommunicated the long-dead Wycliffe, declaring him a heretic. The Church of England, though, honours John Wycliffe each 31 December.

In 1393, King Richard II enacted the *Great Statute of Praemunire* (mainly to save himself from his debts). Whatever the true motive, it was a decisive step against the Pope. To assert Papal authority in England was now an offence.

When we think of the Reformation, Henry VIII comes to mind. There was, though, unrest about the Church's teachings and the conduct of clergy a whole century before then. Moreover, Henry VIII, without the *Great Statute* to hand, could not have destroyed Cardinal Wolsey and bullied the clergy into submission.

Still, all that was a long way off. Now, there was a new King, Henry IV, who had ousted Richard II in 1399 with hardly any effort, or so it seems. There was a new century too.

True enough, in John's native Wales, Owain Glyndwr had just begun his uprising against English rule. If John knew of it, however, it does not seem he returned to his homeland.

In Holy Trinity's scroll, he is John Blew LL.D., a doctor of civil law, no less. This was one of the results of Edward I's defeat and annexation of the Principality of Wales in 1283. Welshmen became eligible to study at Oxford University. This is how we know of John Blew.

John went to Oxford from St David's diocese meaning he was born as far west in Wales as you can go. He first appears in the Oxford archive in 1400 as a proctor (attorney) at New College. In 1401, he receives his *LL.D.* and becomes Rector of Binegar.

There are stages to becoming a priest. Four minor orders prepare you but do not commit you to the priesthood then follow three major or Holy Orders that do.

By 1401, John must have progressed through minor orders. However, he was not ordained sub-deacon (the first Holy Order) until 1402 and deacon until 1406. Though he lived until 1413, no record survives of his ordination as a priest.

We do know that in 1402, John, colleague Philip Morgan and our Prebendary Richard Courtenay, secured a loan from Oxford's *Vaughan Chest* using a book as collateral. The book, by Nicholas de Lyra, was a biblical commentary that was to sway Martin Luther. This hints that the trio favoured the radical views of Oxford's John Wycliffe.

The last thing we know is that John, with Philip Morgan, defended Oxford University in 1406 in a case before the City's *Court of Hustings*.

The history of Rector Blew begs some questions. Why, ten days before making him our Rector, did Bishop Henry Bowet give John indefinite leave of absence? Why did the Bishop make John our Rector before John had taken any Holy Orders, let alone been ordained priest?

Both Courtenay and Morgan became bishops and spent most of their time on the King's business. From his association with them, it seems that John spent most of his time away from Wells. Who then, you may well ask, looked after the poor souls of Binegar Parish who paid their tithes to keep John Blew and Richard Courtenay living in style?