

Prebendary Thomas Chaundler – playwright

It was common in the 1400s for a senior churchman to have little to do with the parish that gave him his living. Thus it was with Thomas Chaundler, our Whitchurch Prebendary for 27 years from 1463.

Born in Wells in 1418, maybe in Sadler Street – certainly in St Cuthbert Parish, he knew this area. At age 11, he became a scholar at Winchester College. Aged 16, he went to Oxford where he read divinity, canon and civil law. He rose swiftly to become Warden of Winchester and New Colleges and Chancellor of Oxford University.

He was granted many livings courtesy of friendships with four bishops, including our own Thomas Bekyngton, another local lad (well Frome).

These were years when church, university and the world of affairs intertwined. Bekyngton, for example, was secretary to Henry VI. If Chaundler played no part in local life, he was part of the social fabric of the nation.

History remembers Chaundler as an early *renaissance man* but mainly as author of a play the *Liber Apologeticus* or a Defence of the Human Race in Every State. Dedicated to Bekyngton, it is in four acts.

It encompasses Man's creation and fall, his responsibility and guilt and a human Incarnation as God's solution for Man's loss of grace. It ends with Man giving thanks for his redemption. Bolstered by the 'love of eternal life' just Man dies joyfully, having recovered his mantle of immortality. On this triumphant note, the play ends.

The *Liber Apologeticus* is the earliest academic drama known in England. It takes from the *Mystery Plays* like those still performed in York and foresees *Morality Plays*. Its protagonist, however, is neither the Adam of the mysteries nor the typical sinner of the moralities but Man, 'in every state of the human condition'.

The play was not for the public stage. Chaundler dedicated it to Bishop Bekyngton, on whom he heaped praise. Maybe he read it aloud in the Bishop's Palace in Wells. Whether he did or not, the Bishop then granted him the Prebend of Whitchurch.

In 1481, Chaundler became dean of Hereford where he died in 1490. He is buried in the Cathedral.