

## MITRE AND MONKS OPPOSED

*In this article, Derek Barnard muses on the different priorities of the monks of St Andrews Priory and the Bishop of Rochester in days gone by and wonders at the machinations of the men of God.*

It is unreasonable to expect that, over 400 years, the relationship between the Priory of St Andrews and the Bishop of Rochester would always be harmonious. Indeed, many instances of argument and litigation can be found within the historical references. Naturally the monks carefully guarded their rights, privileges and manors to ensure that their income would keep pace with the needs of their house and the good works expected of them. Bishops would likewise expect their income to cover all the trappings to which their rank and duties entitled them. Unfortunately, the small, and not too rich priory could not always meet the needs of both, especially if the Bishop, or the monks, decided to claim more than their just entitlements.

In the year 1283, a new Bishop, Thomas de Inglethorpe and a new Prior, Thomas de Wouldham, faced each other across the Chapter House floor in the presence of the presiding Archbishop of Canterbury. The Bishop stood accused of creating many needless offices within the Priory and filling them with his own nominees. Having heard the evidence, the Archbishop called the Bishop to him. "It is insinuated to us by the brethren that you wrong the church at Rochester by acting against the wishes of the Prior and seniors of the Chapter". Then said the Archbishop "My Lord, you do ill". "My predecessors" answered he "have done the same". "By St Francis" rejoined the Archbishop "If an angel did it, he did ill!". It is reported that the Bishop took better advice after this confrontation and was at harmony with the Chapter.

Thomas the Prior remained an active defender of the Priory's rights until Thomas the Bishop died in 1292. The monks then elected the Prior to the See because he had been a strenuous upholder of the rights of the Priory and they believed that he would 'correct the evils he had abundantly lamented and against which he had fought'.

However, it seems that he immediately took the leaderless Priory to the Court at Canterbury to affirm his disputed rights. Solomon, not the wisest man in the Bible, but he of Rochester - a Justiciary who had earlier been deprived of that office and heavily fined - did all in his power to prejudice the Justices against the monks. He was successful. The Justices sided with the Bishop and the jury was intimidated.

What appeared to be the Wrath of God then descended upon the Bishop's supporters. Gilbert, the Bailiff of Malling, Henry of Higham, the Bishop's advisor and the Sheriff of Kent all died within a few days of each other. The Justices rushed to Rochester to apologise to the monks for finding against them as they had been 'wickedly deceived by the craft of Solomon'. Solomon also met his demise, murdered by the Parson of Snodland who slipped poison into his food whilst dining with him. Poor Solomon died fifteen days later.

I did look for a moral to the story but when I found that Bishop Thomas de Wouldham lived and enjoyed his privileges for a further twenty-seven years, there seemed little point.



One of the Bishop's critics?  
(Detail from the Chapter House doorway)