

Robert Stillington

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ALTHOUGH STILLINGTON is arguably a key figure in the events of 1483, a collated view of his career has not hitherto been presented.

After graduating from Oxford as doctor of civil and canon law, in 1442 he was appointed Principal of Deep Hall.¹ Thereafter, his ecclesiastical appointments during the reign of Henry VI were many: canon and then chancellor of Wells; rector of St Michael, York;² archdeacon first of Taunton and then of Colchester; canon of York;³ dean of St Martin le Grand,⁴ and occupant of five prebends. Under Edward IV he received two more prebends, was appointed parson of Ayshebury,⁵ and made archdeacon of Berkshire. In July 1461, he was holding seven ecclesiastical appointments (including three prebends) simultaneously.⁶

Probably his appointment as Keeper of the Privy Seal in June 1460 marks the end of his active ecclesiastical career; prior to that date only five civil appointments are recorded—discussions with Burgundian ambassadors in 1448,⁷ commissions of oyer and terminer in 1450⁸ and 1458,⁹ and other legal commissions in 1451¹⁰ and 1452.¹¹

On his accession, Edward IV retained Stillington as Keeper of the Privy Seal, for which he was paid £365 yearly from 1st November, 1461.¹² In February 1462, he was one of five ambassadors appointed to treat with John de Ile, earl of Rosse and lord of the Isles, for concerted action against Scotland,¹³ and in January 1467, he was one of nine commissioners appointed to treat with the duke of Burgundy for a truce and "mercantile intercourse."¹⁴

However, by the latter date he held greater eminence, having been elected Bishop of Bath and Wells on 28th January, 1465; this possibly came as no surprise, since on the 20th of that month he had been granted custody of the temporalities of the bishopric.¹⁵ Even greater glory was in store—on 20th June, 1467, he was appointed Chancellor¹⁶ following the dismissal of George Neville on 8th June.¹⁷

On the Lancastrian restoration, Stillington was deprived of his office, but in 1471 he was one of the go-betweens who arranged the reconciliation between Edward IV and Clarence,¹⁸ and at Edward's restoration he again became Chancellor.¹⁹

In July 1471 he was appointed one of the administrators of the lands of Edward, prince of Wales,²⁰ and in February 1473 he became one of the prince's "tutors and councillors."²¹

However, in October 1472 illness had already caused him to be absent from the opening of Parliament,²² the great seal being temporarily held by John Alcock, Bishop of Rochester.²³ At the beginning of April 1473 Stillington

prorogued Parliament, although earlier he had been too ill to open the session,^{24 25} and John Morton had held the seal for a short period.²⁶ On 8th June, 1473, he ceased to be Chancellor.²⁷ Several authors refer to him as "dismissed" from this post, with the clear implication of loss of royal favour but the most likely explanation is that recurrent ill-health necessitated his retirement.

In February 1475 he was appointed one of the trustees to execute Edward IV's last will,²⁸ and later that year he was employed in an unsuccessful attempt to obtain from the duke of Brittany the surrender of Henry Tudor. In July 1477 he was one of twelve persons appointed to "prorogue the truce with France, and to treat concerning mercantile intercourse."²⁹

Stillington had hitherto received three royal pardons—in October 1460 from Henry VI,³⁰ again from that monarch in January 1471,³¹ and from Edward IV in February 1472³²—but these were probably routine, unlike that of 1478. On 6th March, 1478, Elizabeth Stoner wrote informing her husband that Stillington was in the Tower.³³ It was over three months later, on 20th June, that Edward IV issued a "declaration that Robert, bishop of Bath and Wells, has been faithful to the king and done nothing contrary to his oath of fealty, as he has shown before the king and certain lords; and general pardon to him."³⁴ However, his 'disgrace' seems to have interfered not at all with his judicial duties: even if his arrest was as early as the execution of Clarence (18th February), already by 14th April he was appointed to a Berkshire Commission of the Peace; in the light of this his pardon might seem rather a formality, particularly as he was on a Southampton Commission on 10th July.³⁵ He appears, therefore, to have spent only a short time in the Tower. However, Comines does record that he paid a "round sum" to secure his release,³⁶ and the Parliament of early 1478 was the last in which he held the post of Trier of Petitions (English), usually given to 'reliable' men.³⁷

Thereafter his only major royal duty was in January 1479 when, together with bishop Morton and earls Rivers and Essex, he was appointed to treat with Louis XI's representative to extend the Treaty of Picquigny to last 101 years and to pay the existing pension throughout that period to Edward IV and his successors.³⁸ Preliminaries of agreement were signed in February 1479, although subsequently repudiated by Louis XI.³⁹

However, Stillington did not drop out of public life completely. He had been appointed to all Commissions of the Peace in Somerset since February 1466, in Southampton since November 1466, in Middlesex from September 1472, and in Berkshire from December 1474. He continued to serve in all four counties under Edward IV and, with the exception of Berkshire, until the end of the reign of Richard III. In 1476 alone his name appears on eight Commissions, in 1479 on seven, and in 1483 reached a total of ten (one under Edward IV, three under Edward V, and six under Richard III).

In 1483 Stillington served as a member of Edward V's council.⁴⁰ Subsequently he took part in Richard III's coronation.⁴¹

On 22nd August, 1485, Henry VII issued a warrant for his arrest, and five days later he was in prison in York "sore crased by reason of his trouble." In October 1485 he was one of the bishops officiating at Henry VII's coro-

nation,⁴² but he was not summoned to the opening of Henry's first Parliament in November.⁴³ However, on 22nd November, 1485, he was granted a full pardon, and when the act which had declared Edward IV's children to be bastards was repealed, the king refused to call him to account for his share in its composition. Nevertheless, he was deprived of the deanery of St Martin, mention being made in the act of the "horrible and haneous offences ymagined and doune" by him against the king.⁴⁴

Stillington appears as a prisoner at Windsor in October 1487, having been reluctantly surrendered to the king by the authorities of Oxford University, where he had sought refuge following the failure of the Simnel rebellion, in which he took part. He was released from prison and died in 1491.⁴⁵ He was buried at Wells Cathedral in a chapel which he had built there.

The events of 1478, 1483 and 1485 are connected by the statement of Comines, the sole contemporary source mentioning Stillington (although only indirectly, as "the bishop of Bath"), that "king Edward, having been formerly in love with a beautiful young lady, promised her marriage, upon condition that he might lie with her; the lady consented, and, as the bishop affirmed, he married them when nobody was present but they two and himself."⁴⁶ In *Titulus Regius* the lady is identified as Eleanor Butler, and Edward IV's marriage to Elizabeth Woodville is alleged to have taken place after the Butler contract/marriage but before Lady Eleanor's death. If this was the case then the Woodville marriage was indeed illegal, even if the Butler liaison stopped short of marriage. Among other examples there is that of Isabel, daughter of Thomas, Lord Dacre, who in May 1453 contracted a marriage with Thomas, Lord Clifford; in 1454 she in fact married Sir John Butler of Warrington; Lord Clifford fell in the first battle of St Albans in May 1455, but Isabel's pre-contract with him formed the basis for the dissolution of her marriage in 1458.⁴⁷

The circumstances surrounding the arrest, trial and execution of Clarence are well documented; suffice to say that there are many reasons which taken singly or together could account for Edward's treatment of him. But if we are asked to assume a connection between Stillington and Clarence because of the proximity of the bishop's arrest and the Duke's execution, there is certainly no evidence to suggest what, apart from the pre-contract, might have drawn them together. However, it is then necessary to assume that if Clarence knew of the contract he did not disclose his knowledge until the month preceding his death; we are constrained to this because Stillington was appointed to a Southampton Commission of the Peace as late as 19th January, 1478, unless we assume that Clarence's disclosure was at an earlier date but for some reason Edward IV delayed Stillington's arrest.

The intriguing vagueness of Stillington's pardon in 1478 leads one to ask to what "oath of fealty" it refers. It may simply be Edward IV's right to the throne, *vis-a-vis* Clarence who during the re-adeption had been recognised as heir to the throne after Edward, son of Henry VI. Alternatively, it may be the oath taken by the nobility and higher clergy (including Stillington) in July 1471,⁴⁸ in which they acknowledged Edward IV's eldest son as heir to the crown, and as king at his father's death, and on which the revelation of a pre-contract would have great impact.

It can reasonably be asked whether Edward would have released Stillington if there was a possibility that he might disclose such dangerous knowledge. However, few men would have defied Edward while he lived, least of all when he had just executed his own brother, and no one could have foreseen that the comparatively elderly bishop⁴⁰ would outlive his sovereign. Another pertinent question stems from the fact that those authors who accept that it was Stillington's disclosure of the pre-contract which sparked off the events leading to Richard's assumption of the crown, assume that he revealed his secret in early June 1483: why did he delay so long after Edward IV's death? Is it possible that the bishop himself was doubtful whether a contract and/or marriage entered into secretly, and witnessed only by himself, was a proper legal bar to the Woodville marriage?

In 1483 (according to Henry VII) Stillington helped draw up the *Titulus Regius*. But why was he chosen—a man who had last served in a major official capacity in 1479? Or had he some special knowledge, as Comines suggests? The Act repealing *Titulus Regius* only compounds the mystery, by simply accusing Stillington of "offences ymaged and doune." This may refer to Stillington's embassy to Brittany in 1475, although it seems more likely that the offence "doune" was to draw up the act which had declared illegitimate Henry's queen-to-be; but what had Stillington "ymaged"? Perhaps it is playing with words, but we can at least consider whether Stillington was really being accused of having "ymaged" the pre-contract. Certainly Henry VII went out of his way to stop a public enquiry in Stillington's 'offence'; an episode which bears an intriguing resemblance to that of the Tyrell 'confession', which also was never followed up by a more searching enquiry.

How are we to assess Stillington? Classified by Mary Clive⁶⁰ as "one of Edward's few really bad appointments," he has been judged "a man of rather mediocre talents" by Kendall,⁶¹ who considers him an "undistinguished" Chancellor. However Ross,⁶² in a general statement on Edward IV's use of churchmen, points out that they owed their advancement primarily "to their value to the king," and certainly Stillington's continuance in office even after Edward's return from exile hardly accords with "mediocre talents," and even as late as 1479 Edward rated his ability highly enough to include him on the high-powered commission to France. Jacob⁶³ considers him one of the "able men" on Edward V's council, in company with Russell and Gunthorp, and Markham,⁶⁴ regarded him as "a good and pious bishop" and "an able statesman." Such conclusions seem in accordance with the known facts, although Ross⁶⁵ has pointed out that Stillington visited his diocese only once in 26 years; however, it is doubtful whether his contemporaries would have expected him to be committed to a pastoral life.

During the reign of Edward IV he founded the college of St Andrew, Nether Acaster, where instruction was to be given "without exaction of money or other thyngs" from scholars, who may be "all maner of persons of whatsoever Cuntre they be within the Reame of Englonde."⁶⁶

Another facet of his career is perhaps seen in the fact that by June 1463, Edward IV was in his debt for nearly £1000;⁶⁷ because of the exception of the

dean of St Martin's from various Parliamentary financial bills, Mary Clive sees him as "the channel through which Edward carried on his extensive, successful and well-hidden trading activities,"⁵⁸ but while Stillington's wealth may have been influenced by Edward IV's patronage, already by October 1460 Henry VI had owed him £600.⁵⁹

However one may judge Stillington, he was certainly far from being the shadowy, insignificant figure characterised by many historians.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. *Dictionary of National Biography*, Vol. XVIII (1909), pp. 1265-7; further facts are taken from DNB except where otherwise noted.
2. Clements R. Markham, *Richard III* (reprinted 1973), p. 94.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Calendar of Patent Rolls 1452-61*, p. 470.
5. *CPR 1461-7*, p. 17. 6. *Ibid.*
7. Sir Thomas Duffus Hardy, *Syllabus of Rymer's Foedera*, Vol. 2 (1873), p. 679.
8. *CPR 1446-52*, pp. 434-5. 9. *CPR 1452-61*, p. 439.
10. *CPR 1446-52*, p. 466. 11. *Ibid.*, p. 537.
12. *CPR 1461-7*, pp. 149-50. 13. *Ibid.*, p. 115.
14. Hardy, p. 697.
15. *CPR 1461-7*, p. 387.
16. *History of Parliament, Register of the Ministers and of the Members of both Houses 1439-1509* (1938), p. 341n.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 340n.
18. Mary Clive, *This Son of York* (1973), p. 165.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 192.
20. *CPR 1467-77*, p. 283. 21. *Ibid.*, p. 366.
22. *History of Parliament*, p. 393n.
23. Hardy, p. 703.
24. *History of Parliament*, p. 393. 25. *Ibid.*, p. 397.
26. Lord Campbell, *The Lives of the Lord Chancellors and Keepers of the Great Seal of England*, Vol. 1 (1848), p. 417.
27. *History of Parliament*, p. 393. 28. *Ibid.*, pp. 398-9.
29. Hardy, p. 709.
30. *CPR 1452-61*, p. 631.
31. *CPR 1467-77*, p. 234. 32. *Ibid.*, p. 310.
33. P. M. Kendall, *Richard III* (Sphere books, 1973), p. 217.
34. *CPR 1476-85*, p. 102.
35. These and succeeding references to Commissions of the Peace are taken from the appendices to the three volumes of the *CPR* covering the period 1461-85.
36. Philip de Comines, *Memoirs*, London (1817), p. 312.
37. *History of Parliament*, Introduction, p. liv.
38. Charles Ross, *Edward IV* (1974), p. 252-3.
39. Ross, p. 254.
40. E. F. Jacob, *The Fifteenth Century 1399-1485* (1961), p. 616.
41. *DNB* records that he performed the ceremony of hallowing the king and queen, but does not indicate the source of this information.
42. S. B. Chrimes, *Henry VII* (1972), p. 60.
43. *History of Parliament*, p. 499n.

44. *Rotuli Parliamentorum*, Vol. 6 (1777), p. 292.
45. Chrimes, p. 242n.
46. Comines, p. 312.
47. A. R. Myers, The Household of Queen Margaret of Anjou 1452-3, *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, Vol. 40, No. 2, March 1958, p. 404n.
48. *Rymer's Foedera*, Vol. 11 (1710), pp. 714-5.
49. Kendall, p. 218, calculated that "in May of 1483 he was something over sixty years of age." If one assumes that his first appointment is unlikely to have occurred before he was at least 20 years old, then 1420 would seem a reasonable supposition for the year of his birth.
50. Clive, p. 124.
51. Kendall, p. 218.
52. Ross, p. 320.
53. Jacob, p. 616.
54. Markham, p. 97.
55. Ross, p. 320.
56. *Rot. Parl.*, Vol. 6, pp. 256-7; the latter regulation is of interest if "county" is intended, and particularly noteworthy if "country" is the correct reading.
57. *CPR 1461-7*, p. 283.
58. Clive, pp. 107-8.
59. *CPR 1452-61*, p. 470.

Coats of Arms of some Ricardian Contemporaries

LAWRENCE T. GREENSMITH

TWO TEWKESBURY KNIGHTS

Sir Roger Tocotes (1430-1492)

Sir James Tyrell (1445-1502)

AFTER THE Battle of Tewkesbury some 55 knights and knights banneret were made; from these I have chosen two, one well enough known to his contemporaries (see *Ricardian*, No. 52, March 1976, pages 16 to 21) although virtually unknown to later generations, and the other perhaps too well known. About the only thing they have in common is the tincture of their arms.

Of *TOCOTES* there can be little to add after Kenneth Hillier's article. Perhaps the most startling event in his life was his involvement in the story of Ankarette Twynho. As Kendall tells it, it is both curious and shocking. Over 80 of Clarence's minions forcibly took her from Layford, where she lived in Somerset, and carried her off to Warwick where Clarence had terrifying powers. She was charged with having poisoned the Duchess and promptly