

The Register of Robert Stillington, Bishop of Bath and Wells 1466-91

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This paper¹ seeks to show how the register compiled for Robert Stillington, for twenty-five years bishop of Bath and Wells in the late fifteenth century, contributes to the understanding of the decoration of administrative documents in this period. It was largely compiled under the supervision of Hugh Sugar who, as vicar-general, was responsible for much of the routine administration of the diocese. He evidently encouraged the pen work embellishments, which are such a striking feature of this volume, and seems to have employed an artist whose only other known work appears in manuscripts commissioned by the previous bishop, Thomas Becketon. This links Stillington's register directly to the academic elite of Winchester and New College, Oxford, and the culture of the Yorkist court.

Dubbed *ce mauvais évêque* by his French contemporary, Philippe de Commines,² Robert Stillington enjoyed a colourful career. Probably born in Yorkshire c. 1410, he first appears in the records as a doctor of civil law at Oxford in 1443, by which time he was also a proctor of Lincoln College and principal of Deep Hall. At this point, probably already in his thirties, he embarked on the official and ecclesiastical career for which he is now remembered. A protégée of Thomas Becketon, the recently consecrated bishop of Bath and Wells, he was appointed as Becketon's chancellor and to a prebend in Wells Cathedral in 1445, but not ordained priest there until 1447. We then find him on a diplomatic mission to Burgundy in 1448 and as a royal councillor a year later. Political, diplomatic and administrative work was to occupy him for most of the rest of his life. He received extensive ecclesiastical patronage until, by 1461, he was archdeacon of both Colchester and Taunton, held prebends in Wells, York, St David's and St Stephen's, Westminster, was rector of Ashbury in Berkshire and dean of the royal free chapel of St Martin's-le-Grand in London. In 1464 and 1465 he added the archdeaconries of Berkshire and Wells, but gave up all these pluralities apart from St Martin's-le-Grand on his consecration as Becketon's successor as bishop of Bath and Wells

¹ I must express particular thanks to Dr Anne Sutton, who made the original proposal that I write this paper, and to Dr Kathleen Scott, both of whom have read this paper in draft and made many valuable suggestions. Any remaining errors are, of course, my own. I am also grateful to the Richard III and Yorkist History Trust for a grant towards the cost of the illustrations, and to the staff of the Somerset Archive and Record Service, the British Library Manuscripts Department and the Librarians of Trinity College, Cambridge, and New College Oxford for photographs and other assistance.

² Quoted in Charles Ross, *Richard III*, London 1981, reprinted 1990, p. 89.

in 1466. In the civil sphere he had been keeper of the privy seal since 1460 and was appointed chancellor of England in 1467. Only after his release from this last post in 1473 did he find any significant time for his episcopal duties and in the autumn of 1476 spent three weeks in Wells, his only recorded visit there throughout his twenty-five year tenure of the see. He may have intended to stay longer, but a planned series of visitations never took place and there is no evidence that he ever returned to Wells. After the death of Edward IV he gained favour with Richard III by casting doubt on the legitimacy of his brother's children, the cause of the aspersion of Philippe de Commines, and was so committed in his loyalty to the king that he was promptly imprisoned by Henry Tudor after the battle of Bosworth and deprived of the deanery of St Martin's-le-Grand. However, he was allowed to remain in his bishopric and was pardoned on the following 22 November on account of his 'grete age, long infirmite, and feeblenesse'. Remaining loyal to the House of York, he continued in disfavour with Henry VII. Implicated in treason in 1487, probably after the rebellion of Lambert Simnel, he sought refuge in the University of Oxford. After much argument the University surrendered him to the king, by whom he was imprisoned for a time in Windsor Castle. Thereafter he appears to have resided at his episcopal manor of Dogmersfield, Hampshire, and died in May 1491.³

Absence from his diocese did not, however, indicate indifference. He is known to have supported building work in the cloisters of Wells Cathedral and was commemorated there for sixty years after his death by a magnificent tomb set in the chantry chapel which he had built for himself adjoining the east cloister walk. It was cruciform in plan, with a nave of three bays, north and south transepts, a crossing and a chancel of two bays. The whole was fan-vaulted and Stillington's tomb occupied the centre of the chancel. It was constructed between 1476 and 1488, the same time as the fan vault over the crossing of the Cathedral itself, which Nikolaus Pevsner described as the only perpendicular contribution to the architecture of the building. Dr Warwick Rodwell has suggested that, in his chantry chapel, Stillington may have commissioned the first fan-vault in Somerset, introducing this latest of building innovations through his familiarity with London and the court circle. Described by Leland in 1542 as 'exceding goodly', the chapel

³ Michael Hicks, 'Robert Stillington', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (ODNB), 2004; R.L. Storey in J. I. Catto and Ralph Evans, eds., *The History of the University of Oxford*, vol. 2, Oxford 1992, p. 738 n. 152 corrects the chronology of Stillington's imprisonment from that given in A.B. Emden, *A Biographical Register of the University of Oxford to A. D. 1500*, Oxford 1959. For Dogmersfield as an episcopal residence see C.M. Woolgar, *The Senses in Late Medieval England*, New Haven and London 2006, pp. 207-11. Stillington's reasons for doubting the legitimacy of Edward IV's children under canon law are discussed by R.H. Helmholz in 'The sons of Edward IV: a canonical assessment of the claim that they were illegitimate', in *Richard III: Loyalty, Lordship and Law*, ed. P.W. Hammond, London 1986, reprinted 2000, pp. 106-20.

fell victim to the suppression of the chantries in the reign of Edward VI and was demolished, with the assistance of gunpowder, in 1552-53. All that now remains above ground is the interior west wall, where it abuts that of the east cloister.⁴

Fortunately Stillington has another more enduring memorial at Wells. This is the register recording the legal and administrative acts carried out in his name throughout the period of his episcopacy.⁵ It is a volume of 253 parchment leaves measuring 14½ inches by 11 inches, bound in blind-stamped leather laid over oak boards. The contents fall into five sections, starting with the register kept by Hugh Sugar, Stillington's vicar-general and treasurer of the Cathedral, for the period 11 January 1466 until 21 September 1481 (ff. 1-78). This is extensively embellished with pen and ink decorations. There follows a register of documents executed by the bishop himself 29 September 1471-15 July 1479 (ff. 79-107) and then Sugar's register resumes with more penwork decoration from 6 August 1482 to 15 April 1489 (ff. 108-57), leaving a gap in the record of nearly a year between the two sections. After Sugar's register comes to an end that of his successors takes over immediately without starting a new gathering, and without any significant break in the dates. This runs from 5 May 1489 to 8 April 1491 (ff. 158-69). The fourth section is a record of ordinations (ff. 170-239) and the volume concludes with a register of notarial certificates of elections to office (ff. 240-53). Sir Henry Maxwell-Lyte, who edited the register for the Somerset Record Society, believed that the text may have been compiled to dictation from other memoranda and files, pointing out that the entries are not entirely chronological and the section containing documents executed by the bishop is incomplete.⁶ We may go further and suggest that the gap in 1481-82 between the two sections of Sugar's register and evidence of trimming of the text block by the binder with some loss of marginal penwork both indicate that the book was put together at a later date. It was then decided to include at the end the unfoliated records of ordinations and notarial certificates. However, the appearance is uniform and the binding obviously contemporary.

The gap between the two sections of Sugar's register probably represents a lost gathering. It was certainly already missing by the time that the book was

⁴ N. Pevsner, *The Buildings of England, North Somerset and Bristol*, Harmondsworth 1958, p. 304; Warwick Rodwell *et al.*, *Wells Cathedral, Excavations and Structural Studies 1978-93*, English Heritage Architectural Report 21, 2 vols., London 2001, vol. 1, pp. 199-244. For an illustration of the vault over the crossing see *Wells Cathedral*, Scala Publishers Ltd, London 2005, p. 30.

⁵ Somerset Record Office, D/D/Breg. 7. A calendar of the contents was edited by Sir H.C. Maxwell-Lyte, *The Registers of Robert Stillington, Bishop of Bath and Wells 1466-1491 and Richard Fox, Bishop of Bath and Wells 1492-1494*, Somerset Record Society vol. 52 (1937) (hereafter SRS 52). This omits the register of ordinations (ff. 170-239) and the certificate of the election of the abbot of Muchelney in June 1490 (ff. 251v-253v), cf. pp. vii and 173n.

⁶ SRS 52, p. viii.

assembled for the binder. The text of the first part finishes at the top of the recto of folio 78, the remainder and verso being blank. The following, final leaf of the gathering has been cut out. The second section begins on a new gathering and after Sugar's death in 1489 the record is continued by his successor without a break. However, when the final entries for Stillington's episcopacy had been completed, the last three leaves of the gathering were cut out. At this point also the continuous foliation and numbering of sections in roman numerals comes to an end. The next section begins on a new gathering. Both sections of Sugar's register have a uniform appearance with the margins and text space ruled out. The register of documents executed by the bishop himself 1471-79 has a different appearance and may well have been compiled elsewhere. It is obviously incomplete and may have been all that could be found when the volume was assembled for binding. This idea is supported by the survival of two unfoliated blank leaves at the end of the final gathering, after folio 107, on the last of which is written the catchword 'sexto'. This corresponds with the first word of folio 108, being the resumption of Sugar's register. Furthermore, the undecorated text of this register of bishop's documents begins on folio 79 with the top third as a blank space, clearly intended for an elaborate heading which was never executed. The only comparable blank in this volume occurs on folio 162, at the point after Sugar's death when the record was taken over in May 1490 by his successor as treasurer of the Cathedral, Thomas Harries. This would have been intended for a heading marking the new administrative year running from 25 March, as had been customary throughout Sugar's tenure of the office of vicar-general. The blank space is a stark indication of the change of style of the new administration in this respect.

It is the decoration of these headings which gives this volume its special interest with the extensive use of decorative penwork on and around the initial letter 'S' of the word *sequitur*, which begins the record for each year. Throughout the text for which Sugar was responsible the opportunity to decorate this initial was never missed. It appears on twenty-four occasions with varying degrees of accomplishment and flamboyance. That on the first folio is the most elaborate (Fig. 1), with a drawing of a man firing an arrow at a bird with barred wings, a crest and a long tail, rather like a cross between a falcon and a peacock. The letter itself is formed of interlaced strapwork filled with foliage, flowers and a pair of sunbursts. The sunburst was the most widely used of Yorkist symbols and occurs frequently here as testimony to the support at Wells for the rule of Edward IV.⁷ That for 1467 (f. 7v, Fig. 2) has the letter wrapped in a scrollwork ribbon of studded parchment and decorated with foliage and no less than four sunbursts. In the following year

⁷ In correspondence (23 October 2009) Dr Kathleen Scott questions whether these motifs are sunbursts. I feel that they may be a hybrid flower design, but the radiating shafts certainly suggest the sunburst.

(f. 13r, Fig. 3) the 'S' is a particularly successful space filler in mid-page, composed of interlacing branches with oak leaves, bell-like flowers, aroids and a water lily. In 1469 (f. 24v, Fig. 4) it is drawn out large as a ribbon of scrollwork with the bishop's name written on it. Over the next four years the inspiration seems to falter, but revives in 1474 (f. 44v, Fig. 6) with a magnificent show of strapwork. In 1475 (f. 49v, Fig. 7) it takes the form of a scroll containing the bishop's name incorporating a punning drawing of a tun, all decorated with foliage and three sunbursts. 1477 (f. 58r) has another strapwork 'S' extending into the margin and incorporating foliage and flowers. In 1479 (f. 68r, Fig. 9) a dragon with a looped tail is drawn in the margin, breathing fire which blends into the foliar margin of the 'S'. On those occasions when time pressed, skill was lacking or inclination flagged, such as after the break of 1481-82, attention of some sort was still given to embellishment with strapwork and additional 'S' letters inserted in the spaces. Between 1487 and 1489 (ff. 138r, 148r and 157v) more elaboration returns with a studded ribbon, daggers in scabbards, roses instead of sunbursts in acknowledgement of the Tudor regime, the punning tun again and another marginal dragon. In most cases these decorated initials appear to have been added after the text entries had been completed and are generally confined to the spaces allotted. However, there are exceptions, such as that for 1474 (f. 44v, Fig. 6), which breaks out in great exuberance, with a riot of strapwork loops running into the side and top margins, incorporating into the design the initials of the line of text below and the 'H' of Hugh Sugar's name. Even in more restrained examples, such as those for 1478 and 1479 (ff. 63v and 68r, Figs 8 and 9), where the 'S' is largely confined to a rectangular frame, the strapwork still manages to burst out into the adjoining spaces. Yet the decoration of the first folio remains the most elaborate. It is not only exceptional for incorporating figure drawing, but also for the way in which this has been conceived as integral to the adjoining text, which has been arranged around the man and the bird, the bottom loop of the strapwork joined to the letter 'v' of *Reverendi* below, the toe of the man's shoe looping into the 'R' of Roberti, his bow forming part of the strapwork and the tail of the bird incorporated in the top stroke of the 'B' of *Bathon*.

The focus on the initial 'S' has extra significance not only because it also happened to be the initial of the bishop's surname, but also that of Sugar as well. Indeed, it may have had further significance of this kind. Of the plainer initials from Sugar's period, that for 1471 (f. 32r, Fig. 5) calls for more attention than the others. It is a simple strapwork 'S' with a sunburst and has the name 'Spekynton' entered twice in tiny letters on the central crossmember. The significance of this is obscure. It may refer to a location of that name east of Ilchester, where there was a chantry chapel at this time. It adjoins the present Yeovilton airfield at Bridgchampton. However, it is more likely to refer to one or both of two men who were active about Wells at this time. John Spekyngton appears as a canon

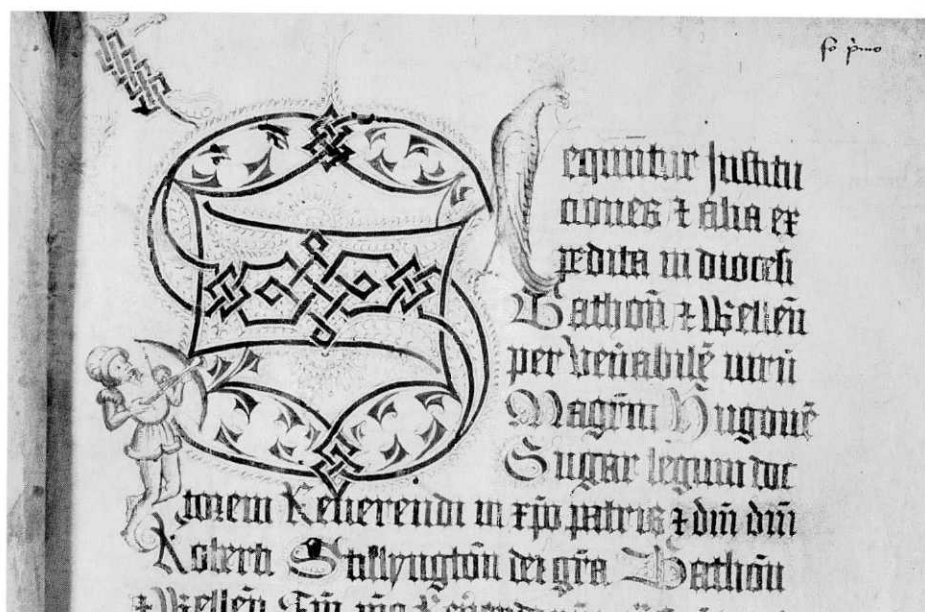


Fig. 1. Stillington's Register, Somerset Archive and Record Service, Taunton (hereafter SRO), D/D/Breg 7, f. 1r; detail showing initial 'S' for 1466. Reproduced by kind permission of the Somerset Record Office



Fig. 2. Stillington's Register (SRO: D/D/Breg 7), f. 7v, detail showing initial 'S' for 1467. Reproduced by kind permission of the Somerset Record Office



Fig. 3. Stillington's Register (SRO: D/D/Breg 7), f. 13r, detail showing initial 'S' for 1468. Reproduced by kind permission of the Somerset Record Office.

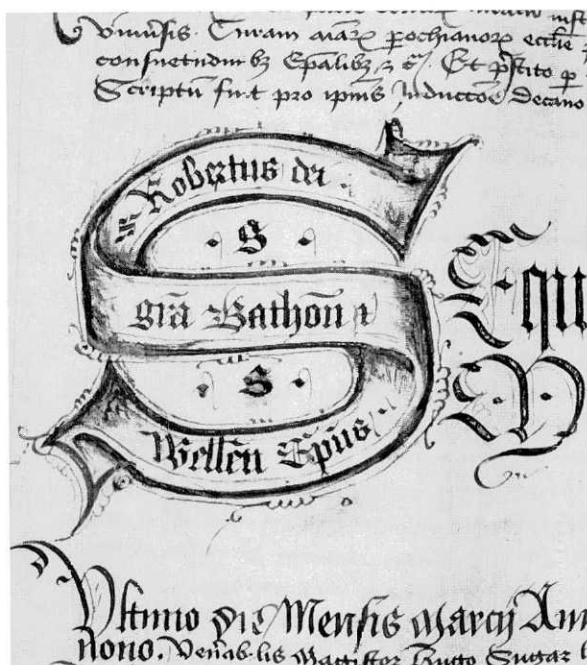


Fig. 4. Stillington's Register (SRO: D/D/Breg 7), f. 24v, detail showing initial 'S' for 1469. Reproduced by kind permission of the Somerset Record Office.

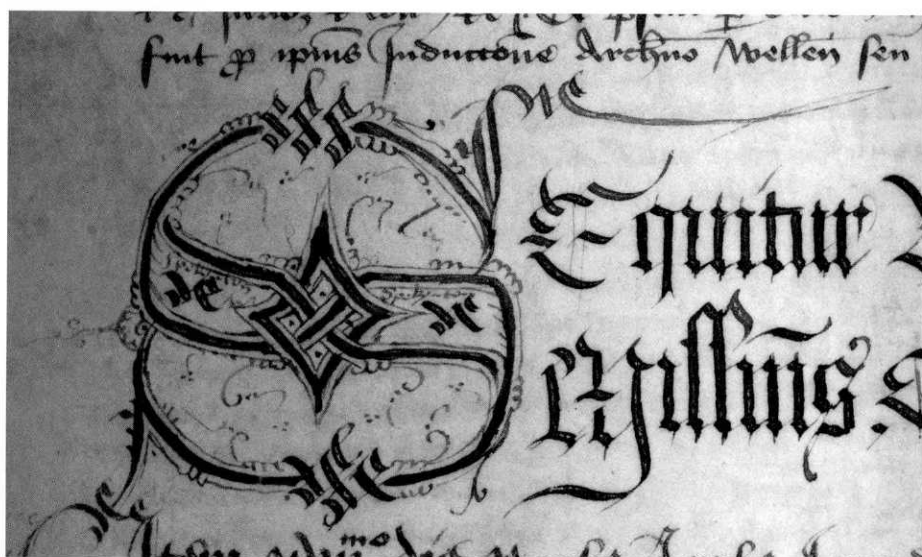


Fig. 5. Stillington's Register (SRO: D/D/Breg 7), f. 32r, detail showing initial 'S' for 1471. Reproduced by kind permission of the Somerset Record Office.



Fig. 6. Stillington's Register (SRO: D/D/Breg 7), f. 44v, detail showing initial 'S' for 1474. Reproduced by kind permission of the Somerset Record Office.

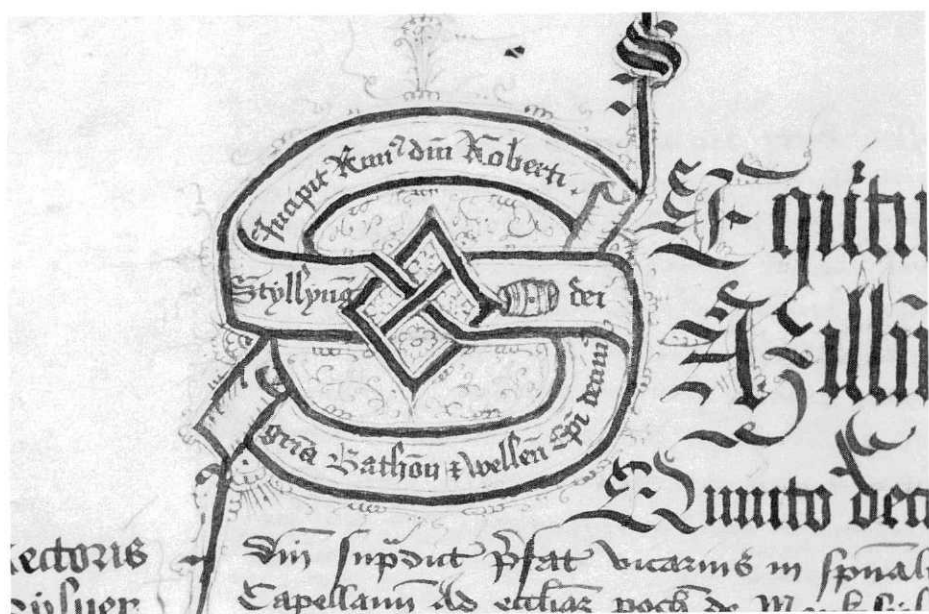


Fig. 7. Stillington's Register (SRO: D/D/Breg 7), f. 49v, detail showing initial 'S' for 1475. Reproduced by kind permission of the Somerset Record Office.



Fig. 8. Stillington's Register (SRO: D/D/Breg 7), f. 63v, detail showing initial 'S' for 1478. Reproduced by kind permission of the Somerset Record Office.



Fig. 9. Stillington's Register (SRO: D/D/Breg 7), f.68r, detail showing initial 'S' for 1479. Reproduced by kind permission of the Somerset Record Office.

of the cathedral in 1467 and may be the same as Master John Spekyngton, who witnessed a ceremony in the church at Doultong in 1494. Alternatively it may be William Spekyngton, who was the incumbent at Doultong 1486-1509 and executor of Hugh Sugar's will in 1489. He received the generous bequest of 100 shillings and a silver-gilt standing cup with cover. The impressive south porch of the church at Doultong, fan-vaulted and almost certainly dating from his time, may have been built at his instigation.⁸ Perhaps one or both of these men, who must have been related, were involved in compiling the register at this time. Certainly the use of the monogram 'S' as a badge is not confined to the penwork of this volume. It also appears on the chancel parapet of the church at Ditchat, which was built at this time and where John Gunthorpe, the dean of Wells, was rector. Here Stillington shares space with the armorial shields of Gunthorpe and Abbot Selwood of Glastonbury. The device was also used by Hugh Sugar himself in his chantry chapel at Wells, where an intertwined 'H' and 'S' are carved in stone alongside a shield displaying his device of a doctor's cap and three sugar loaves. Unlike that of

⁸ Victoria History of the Counties of England, *Somerset*, vol. 3, Oxford 1974 p. 174; SRS 52, pp. 123-124, 141, 152, 200; Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts, *Calendar of the Manuscripts of the Dean and Chapter of Wells*, vol. 2, London 1914, p. 684; F.W. Weaver, ed., *Somerset Medieval Wills (1383-1509)*, Somerset Record Society vol. 15 (1901) (hereafter SKS 16), pp. 275-277; Pevsner, *North Somerset*, p. 181 and pl. 28b.

his bishop, this chantry survives. It is attached to the nave pulpit where it balances that of Bishop Bubwith on the north side. Although Sugar died in 1489, this chapel was constructed during his lifetime and, appropriately, incorporates a fan vault.⁹

The decoration of Stillington's register needs to be understood in this context. Clearly Hugh Sugar had some influence in the matter. The most impressive decorations are all in those sections of the volume recording his activities. There are none in that portion recording the acts of the bishop himself 1471-79 and this manner of embellishment is not carried on by Sugar's successors. After the break in his register in 1481-82 there seems to have been less time or inclination for elaborate decorations, but their revival in 1487-89 indicates that they remained a possibility. From the evidence of the different hands found in the text, there appear to have been a number of scribes at work on it. It may be that one of these had a particular skill with his pen which Hugh Sugar was happy to see put to use. Perhaps a new, suitably gifted clerk was available after 1487, but after 1489 his talents were no longer required. At this point it will be helpful to look at the academic and social background of Sugar and his bishop.

Both men were protégées of Thomas Beckington and Sugar in particular, who was his executor, would have been well aware of the dead bishop's tastes and ideals. Although he became Beckington's chancellor in 1454, cathedral treasurer at Wells in 1460 and spent the latter part of his career there, this was not necessarily the cultural backwater it may seem. Beckington's influence there was extensive and lasting. He appears to have gathered a group of young men about him who remained close associates both at Wells and in the wider world after his death. Educated at Winchester and New College Oxford, Sugar was a member of this scholarly elite. At Oxford he became principal of Henkey Hall in 1444 and would have known Stillington as head of neighbouring Deep Hall at that time.¹⁰ Here he fell under the wing of Beckington, who at this time was a collector of ancient and modern texts and and chancellor to Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester c.1420-c.1438. Beckington had extensive Italian contacts and was responsible for introducing the standards of the 'new' classical Latin and renaissance humanism, including script, to the duke's official correspondence. At Oxford and subsequently at Wells, where he became bishop in 1443, Beckington gathered around him a circle of men who shared his enthusiasm for the 'New Learning'. They included Andrew Holes, who lived in Italy 1433-44 and kept open house to leading scholars in Florence before returning to England with so large a collection of books that

⁹ N. Pevsner, *The Buildings of England, South and West Somerset*, Harmondsworth 1958, p. 149; *Wells Cathedral*, 2005, pp. 68 and 99 illustrate the interior and exterior decoration of Sugar's chantry; see also Robert Dunning, *Bath and Wells, A Diocesan Celebration*, Wellington 2008, p. 40, and Rodwell, *Wells Cathedral*, vol. 2, fig. 505.

¹⁰ SRS 16, pp. 202-207, 277; for both men see Emden, *Biographical Register of the University of Oxford*.

they needed to be sent by sea. On his return he became archdeacon of Wells. Another, John Free, whom Roberto Weiss described as 'beyond all doubt above every fifteenth century English humanist before the time of Grocin and Linacre', and who was interested in medicine as well as letters, was ordained c.1456 before going to Italy, where he died in 1465. Leland records a rumour that he was actually chosen by Pope Paul II to succeed to the see of Bath and Wells and returned there, but died prematurely by poisoning before the appointment could be made.¹¹ The story casts something of a shadow over the manner of Stillington's own appointment, which was not made until a year after his predecessor's death.¹² Be that as it may, it seems unlikely that Beckington would have seen much of Free whilst he was abroad, but Thomas Chaundler, a native of Wells, was always a close associate. Also educated at Winchester and New College, he became chancellor of Wells Cathedral in 1452, warden of New College 1454-75 and was twice chancellor of Oxford University, 1457-61 and 1472-79. His association with Beckington was marked by the compilation of two manuscript books which he conspicuously dedicated to his patron by furnishing them with illustrations of the act of presentation. One, now at Trinity College, Cambridge, is principally made up of a morality play about the Fall of Man, *Liber apologeticus de omni statu humane naturae*.¹³ Apparently composed by Chaundler himself, it is illustrated with fifteen full-page pen and ink pictures and decorated throughout with historiated and scrollwork initials and elaborate coloured spraywork borders incorporating foliage and flowers. It was probably made in Oxford c.1459-1460 (Figs. 10-12). The other, now at New College, Oxford, is a commemoration of the life and works of William of Wykeham.¹⁴ It is decorated in a similar fashion and contains four drawings showing the colleges founded by Wykeham at Winchester and Oxford, the city of Wells with the cathedral and bishop's palace, and a group portrait of Wykeham surrounded by those bishops and academics for whom he had been an inspiration and benefactor. This last is of particular interest because the portraits are labelled and include, amongst others, Thomas Beckington, Chaundler himself, Andrew Holes and Hugh Sugar, respectively bishop, chancellor, archdeacon and treasurer of Wells. In the Trinity College manuscript the presentation scene has a page to itself, showing Chaundler kneeling before the bishop, the book in his hand and receiving a blessing with another cleric standing by (Fig. 10). The New College manuscript, on the other hand, has the scene tucked away in the rear of the view of Wells. The Trinity manuscript further reinforces the association by

¹¹ R. Weiss, *Humanism in England During the Fifteenth Century*, 3rd ed., Oxford 1967, pp. 71-73, 77-80, 106-12, 194-95.

¹² R. J. Mitchell, *John Free: from Bristol to Rome in the Fifteenth Century*, London 1955, p. 132, suggests that his death may have been a result of unintentional food poisoning.

¹³ Trinity College Library, Cambridge, MS. R. 14. 5.

¹⁴ New College Library, Oxford, MS. C. 288.



Thomas Chaundler. C. alme Vniuersitatis Oxonie ꝛ ecclesie Ca-
 thedralis Wellis Cancellarius: ad mliorē dominū t hūiū p̄fule
 Dominū Thomā de beketona Wellis et bathon pontificem
 sūm eā p̄sent opusculo ꝛ sua omnia.

Fig. 10. Thomas Chaundler, *Liber Apologeticus* etc., Chaundler presenting his
 book to Bishop Becketon, Trinity College Library, Cambridge, MS.R.14.5, f. 8v.
 Reproduced by permission of the Master and Fellows of Trinity College.

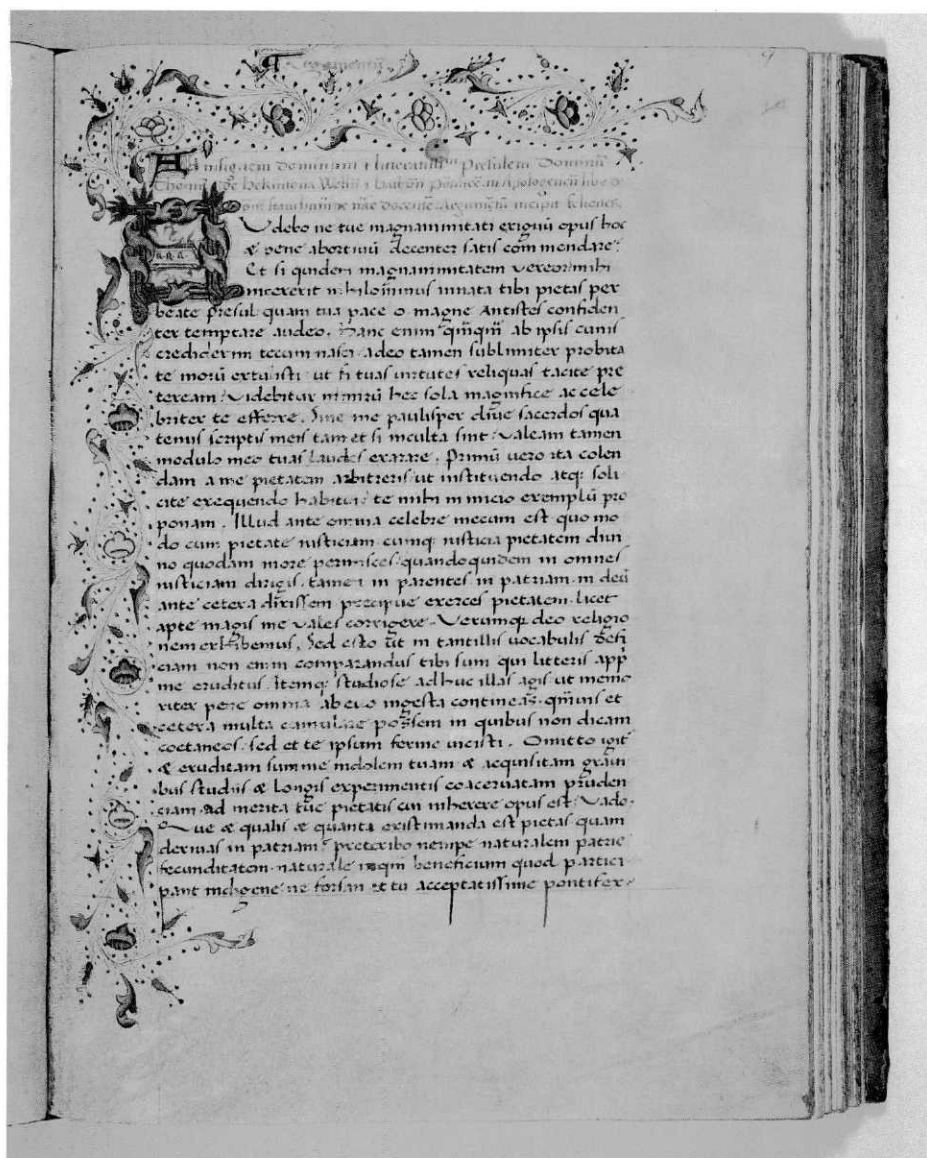


Fig. 11. Thomas Chaundler, *Liber Apologeticus etc.*, dedication page showing the style of the border decorations and with Chaundler's rebus of firebrands forming the initial 'A'. Trinity College Library, Cambridge, MS.R.14.5, f. 9r. Reproduced by permission of the Master and Fellows of Trinity College.

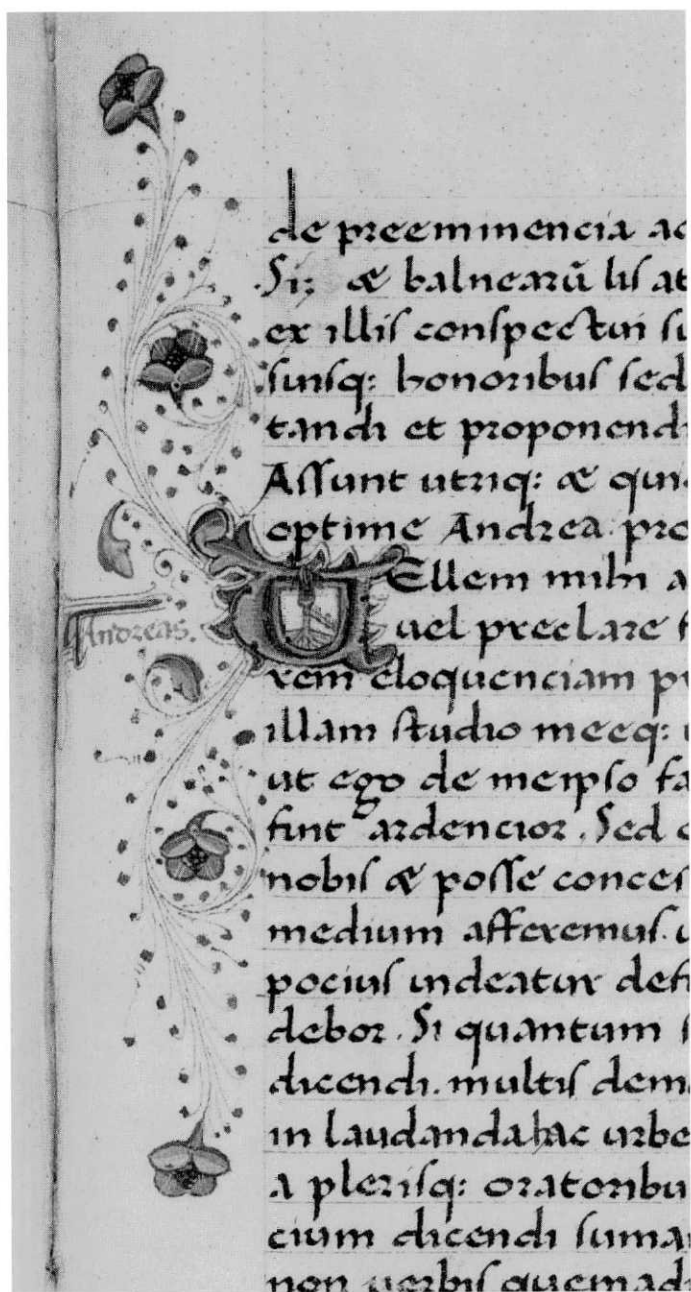


Fig. 12. Thomas Chaundler, *Liber Apologeticus* etc., detail showing the initial 'U' enclosing Beckington's rebus of a beacon. Trinity College Library, Cambridge, MS.R.14.5, f. 37r. Reproduced by permission of the Master and Fellows of Trinity College.

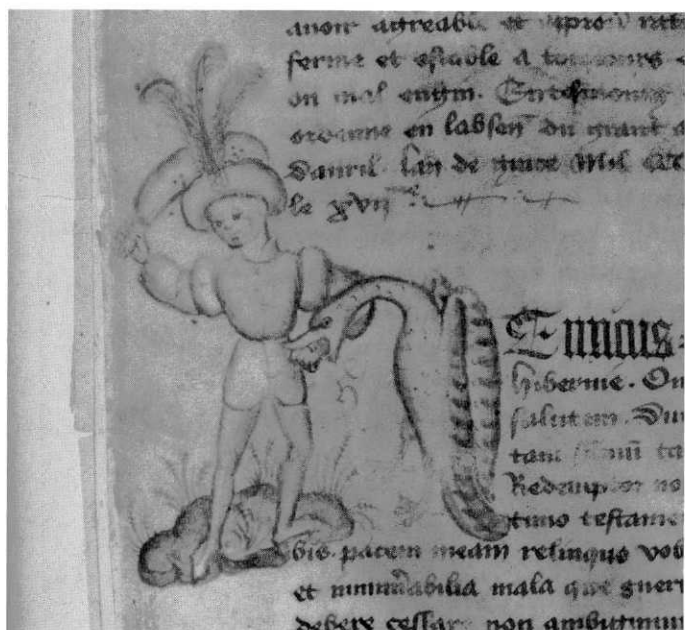


Fig. 13. British Library (hereafter BL), Cotton MS Tiberius B. xii, (Collections of Thomas Beckington, bishop of Bath and Wells, concerning the claim of the king of England to the crown of France etc.), f. 212r, detail showing the initial 'H' of 'Henricus'. Copyright © The British Library Board.



Fig. 14. BL Cotton MS Tiberius B. xii, (Collections of Thomas Beckington, bishop of Bath and Wells, concerning the claim of the king of England to the crown of France etc.), f. 32r, detail showing initial 'S'. Copyright © The British Library Board.

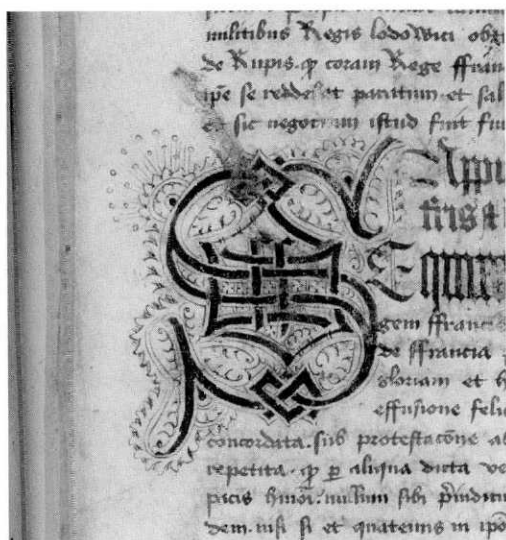


Fig. 15. BL Cotton MS Tiberius B. xii, (Collections of Thomas Beckington, Bishop of Bath and Wells, concerning the claim of the king of England to the crown of France etc.), f. 127r, detail showing initial 'S'. Copyright © The British Library Board.

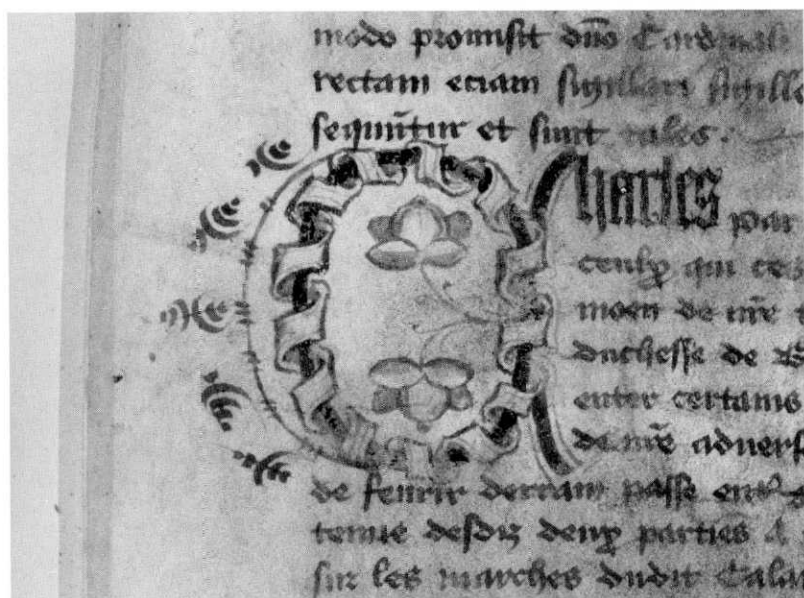


Fig. 16. BL Cotton MS Tiberius B. xii, (Collections of Thomas Beckington, Bishop of Bath and Wells, concerning the claim of the king of England to the crown of France etc.), f. 211r, detail showing the initial 'C' of 'Charles'. Copyright © The British Library Board.

introducing Chaundler's rebus of four firebrands and Beckington's of a beacon as elements in two of the historiated initials of the text (Figs. 11 and 12).¹⁵ There could be no better indication than in these manuscripts of Beckington's role as patron and mentor of this group of men. Both were lodged in Wells Cathedral Library after his death and were seen there by Leland early in the sixteenth century. Unfortunately the silk bags in which they were then kept have long gone, but one can be seen on the book shown in the presentation scene of the Trinity College volume (Fig. 10).¹⁶ Beckington himself appears to have commissioned two other surviving illustrated books, one being a compilation of documents relating to his diplomatic missions and the claim of the king of England to the throne of France, the other a chronicle of the English kings. Although Beckington is not obviously associated with the latter, both are decorated in the same manner, both are in the Cotton collection at the British Library and Dr Kathleen Scott has suggested that the two, along with a fragment now in Leicester University Library, may once have been parts of the same volume.¹⁷

This is of particular interest here, because there is a remarkable similarity between the initial drawing in this register, where the strapwork 'S' is embellished with the figure of a man aiming an arrow at a bird, and a drawing in the first of these books. This is a letter 'H' embellished with the figure of a man with a scimitar in the act of slaying a bird with striped wings (Fig. 13).¹⁸ Similar birds appear elsewhere in this manuscript¹⁹ and in the associated chronicle of the kings of England.²⁰ All are distinguished by the application of shading, possibly with a brush, to add depth and shape to the images and scrollwork. Dr Scott remarks that

¹⁵ Folios 9r and 37r. Two firebrands also appear on f. 21r. The MS has two foliation systems; here I use the numbers in ink. Chaundler was so fond of his own device that he put it up in one of the windows of the Hall at New College while he was Warden there. It featured a number of lighted candles and firebrands with the motto *fiat lux*. Thomas Chaundler, *Liber Apologeticus de Omni Statu Humanae Naturae, A defence of Human Nature in Every State*, ed. Doris Enright-Clark Shoukri, London and New York 1974, p. 36 n. 85.

¹⁶ Both manuscripts are discussed and their principal illustrations reproduced in M.R. James (ed.), *The Chaundler MSS*, Roxburgh Club, London, 1916. See also Thomas Chaundler, *Liber Apologeticus*, ed. D.E.-C. Shoukri. Neither work makes more than passing reference to the decorations of the text. They are also discussed by Kathleen L. Scott in *A Survey of Manuscripts Illuminated in the British Isles: Later Gothic Manuscripts 1390-1490*, 2 vols., London 1996, entries 103 and 114.

¹⁷ Weiss, *Humanism* pp. 133-136; Jeremy Catto, 'Thomas Chaundler', *ODNB*; Kathleen L. Scott, 'The decorated letters of two Cotton manuscripts' in Susan L'Engle and Gerald B. Guest, eds., *Tributes to Jonathan J. G. Alexander, The Making and Meaning of Illuminated Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts, Art and Architecture*, London and Turnhout 2006, pp. 99-110.

¹⁸ British Library (BL), Cotton MS Tiberius B. xii, f. 212r.

¹⁹ See BL, Cotton MS Tiberius B. xii, ff. 87r. and v, 99v, 152r.

²⁰ BL, Cotton MS Julius E. iv art. 3, ff. 89r, 92v.

these figure letters are of a kind 'unique in English manuscripts in any context' and attributes them to a single artist whom she calls the 'Master of the Shaded Initials'. She thinks that the book was compiled whilst Beckington was bishop and possibly designed as a gift to the king, either Henry VI or Edward IV.²¹ However, it is also possible that this Cotton manuscript may have been at Wells. Leland refers to this text about the claims of the king of England to the throne of France amongst the books there. Versions survive in various manuscripts, all of which are thought to be copies of Beckington's lost original. Of these, three are now in the British Library and another in the Ashmole manuscripts at the Bodleian.²² In spite of its damaged condition, the Cotton manuscript remains the most impressive of these, with its many strapwork and scrollwork initials incorporating fabulous beasts and no less than seven examples of birds with barred wings. The initial 'S', where it occurs in an embellished form, bears a close resemblance to those in Stillington's register (Figs 14 and 15). There is also an initial 'C' decorated with shaded scrollwork resembling that on the 'S' of 1467 in Stillington's register (Figs 2 and 16). Whether or not intended as a royal gift, it is also possible that this book may have been made in Wells and maybe remained there after Beckington's death. It is tempting to think that the artist and scribes may have been available in Wells when Hugh Sugar was embarking on the first page of Stillington's register and were called upon to make this and other embellishments.

Another figure in Wells at this time was John Gunthorpe, who became dean of the cathedral in 1472. Unlike his other colleagues, he was a Cambridge graduate. Between 1460 and 1465 he studied Greek and rhetoric at Ferrara and served as a papal chaplain in Rome before returning to England and, amongst other preferments, becoming rector of Ditchat, a Somerset parish about twelve miles south-east of Wells. In Italy he had known John Free and came into possession of some of his books. Before his appointment to Wells he was warden of King's Hall in Cambridge and, throughout his career, much in demand as a diplomat, both under the Yorkist kings and Henry VII. He held numerous offices about the Yorkist court and was appointed keeper of the privy seal in 1483. At Wells he was influenced by the current passion for building, remodelling the deanery to incorporate an oriel window with a newly fashionable fan-vault above it. As rector of Ditchat, as we have seen in partnership with Stillington himself and the abbot of Glastonbury, he was responsible for alterations to the chancel and the introduction of another fan vault over the crossing there. Like others in this group, he was a man conversant with the new humanistic learning, the latest architectural

²¹ Scott, 'The decorated letters', p. 103.

²² BL Cotton MS Tiberius B. xii; BL Harley MS 861; BL Harley MS 4763; Bodleian Library, Oxford, Ashmole MS 1114; James P. Carley, 'John Leland at Somerset Libraries', *Somerset Archaeology and Natural History, Proceedings of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society*, vol. 129, (1987), pp. 141-54 (p. 150, entry 18).

styles and the artistic tastes of the court of Edward IV.²³

The penwork initials of Stillington's register are an indication of how far these tastes were influencing the daily life of the Cathedral. The manner of decorating administrative and legal documents with elaborate penwork had been gaining ground for some time. Its origins have been traced to practice in France and Burgundy round about 1400. The most famous early example is its use by the librarian of the duke of Berry to indicate ownership of the manuscripts in his care. The style, incorporating flourishes, strapwork and high-rising, looping cadels, attached to or rising above the upstrokes of the letters, was particularly suited to the pen. It was soon incorporated into the working style of the scribes, who were the people usually employed in the writing of such documents, and was often exercised with striking accomplishment. Sometimes figurative drawing would be incorporated with shading provided by the pen or possibly with a brush or even smudging with the finger, which brings the work closer to that of the book illuminator. However, Dr Anne Sutton has shown how the work of the scribes, whose craft was a separate one, should be distinguished from that of the book artisans.²⁴

Beckington would have been aware of these developments. As the king's secretary, whose consecration as bishop of Bath and Wells took place at Eton in 1443, just two years after Henry VI's foundation of his colleges there and at Cambridge, he may have known the elaborate decorations provided by William Abel for the charters granted to both colleges in 1446.²⁵ As we have seen, he was himself involved in the commissioning and receipt of finely illustrated manuscript books, some of which he gave to the Cathedral at Wells, and Sugar and possibly also Stillington would have known these. Certainly a few years later in 1479 the exquisite and elaborate strapwork initial on a document conferring secular membership of the Franciscan convent at Bridgwater on the person and family of John Kendall, a merchant of that town, is testimony that the practise of decorating documents

²³ Cecil H. Clough, 'John Gunthorpe', *ODNB*; Weiss, *Humanism*, pp. 122-27; Pevsner, *North Somerset*, pp. 317-19 and pl. 50a; Pevsner, *South and West Somerset*, p. 149.

²⁴ Anne F. Sutton, 'An unfinished celebration of the Yorkist accession by a clerk of the Merchant Staplers of Calais' in Linda Clark, ed., *The Fifteenth Century VIII: Rule, Redemption and Representation in Late Medieval England and France*, Woodbridge 2008, pp. 135-61, esp. 145-51).

²⁵ Sir H.C. Maxwell-Lyte and M.C.B. Dawes, eds., *The Register of Thomas Bekynton, Bishop of Bath and Wells 1443-1465*, Somerset Record Society, vols. 49 and 50 (1934-1935), vol. 49, p. xii; J. Alexander, 'William Abell "lymnour" and fifteenth century English illumination' in A. Rosenauer and Gerold Weber, eds., *Kunsthistorische Forschungen Otto Pächt zu seinem 70 Geburtstag*, Salzburg 1972, pp. 166-72; William Connor, 'The Esholt Priory charter of 1485 and its decoration', *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal* vol. 80, (2008), pp. 121-52, illustrates the Eton Charter (fig. 4). In this article I suggest that Stillington's register may have been compiled in London but, in the light of further research set out here, I no longer think this likely.

was by this time as accepted in Somerset as elsewhere.²⁶ Dr Sutton has recently drawn attention to the celebratory aspects of penwork decoration as applied to the register of the Merchant Staplers of Calais during the 1460s and has compared it with that of Stillington's register.²⁷ Maybe there were celebratory elements at play here too. Before Stillington's consecration there had been a lengthy vacancy when the diocese was without a bishop for a year. Sugar was also in charge of administration during this period, along with Nicholas Carent, the dean of the Cathedral, but the register which they kept was not embellished in the same way.²⁸ Perhaps the sense of relief, even joy at the appointment of Stillington, who was not only a Wells man but also a major political figure, inspired the introduction of more elaborate decoration than had been usual before. There may have been further cause for celebration on account of Sugar's long association with the new bishop and the fact that he made no changes to the administrative arrangements on his appointment.²⁹ Although it does not appear that Stillington gave a great deal of attention to his episcopal duties, he must have had occasional communication with the staff in Wells, who may have attended on him in London or elsewhere from time to time. It is tempting to think that he may have inspected the register on these occasions and approved, even encouraged its embellishment. Both he and Sugar were in touch with the artistic fashions of the Yorkist court and could reflect some of this influence in the diocese, not only in fan-vaulting but even in the scribal practices of Hugh Sugar's office.

After his death Stillington was interred in his splendid chantry chapel at Wells as he had intended. Archaeological evidence has been found for a fine, painted and gilded Bath stone monument. He also provided himself with another memorial, a college which he founded for the education of boys in his native village of Acaster Selby near York. A.F. Leach describes it as 'one of the most interesting and humanistic of the colleges modelled on Winchester and Eton'. It was organised to teach the three separate disciplines of grammar, music and song, and writing and 'scrivener craft'. Although this too was a victim of the Reformation and was largely suppressed under Edward VI, it does appear to have

²⁶ Somerset Record Office, D/D/bw 109, reproduced in Dunning, *Bath and Wells*, p. 28. Dr Scott makes a similar observation in respect of a manuscript illustrated in York (BL Egerton MS 2572), Kathleen L. Scott, *Tradition and Innovation in Later Medieval English Manuscripts*, London 2007, p. 146 and *Later Gothic MSS*, vol. 2, entry 139 and vol. 1, illus. 502, 503.

²⁷ Sutton, 'An unfinished celebration' pp. 145-46.

²⁸ The *sede vacante* register, consisting of 15 folios, is bound with two later ones, Somerset Record Office D/D/Breg. 29. It is calendared by Maxwell-Lyte along with Stillington's register in SRS 52.

²⁹ R. L. Storey, *Diocesan Administration in the Fifteenth Century*, Borthwick Paper 16, York 1959, pp. 20-21.

survived on a reduced scale into the seventeenth century.³⁰ Its site is now marked by College Farm. His buildings demolished, his burial place desecrated and his charitable works overthrown, the 'bad bishop' is now commemorated only by the register compiled by his servant Hugh Sugar and the splendid penwork decoration with which it is provided.

³⁰ Rodwell, *Wells Cathedral*, vol. 1, pp. 237-238; Hicks, *ODNB*; A.F. Leach, *Early Yorkshire Schools*, vol. 2, Yorkshire Archaeological Society Record Series, vol. 33, (1903), pp. 89-100; *eodem*, *The Schools of Medieval England*, London 1915, pp. 274-75; W.E. Tate, *A.F. Leach as a Historian of Yorkshire Education*, Borthwick Paper 23, York 1963, p. 15.