

BOVEY TRACEY PARISH CHURCH –ITS CONNECTION WITH THOMAS BECKET and LADY MARGARET BEAUFORT

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THOMAS BECKET

The parish church is the oldest building in Bovey Tracey. There is a legend that from medieval times it was connected with Thomas Becket and one of his murderers, William de Tracy. There is no documentary evidence to support this.

The current dedication of the parish church is to Saints Peter, Paul and Thomas of Canterbury. (Fig. 1) Early Bishops' Registers show that in 1401 the church was described as dedicated to Saints Peter and Paul. The ecclesiastical historian Professor Nicholas Orme listed that the first reference to any dedication to Thomas Becket was as recent as 1742. He summarised that the dedication was, 'Peter and Paul before the Reformation; Thomas Becket since 1742, probably a conjecture based on the fair and the Tracey connection. Peter and Paul were recovered in 1846, but Thomas Becket has persisted alongside them'.¹



Figure 1. Sign in the grounds of Bovey Tracey Parish Church. Frances Billinge 2016

Why was St Thomas Becket added in 1742? Orme explained that this was an incorrect assumption made by the antiquarian Browne Willis who, building on the earlier work of John Ecton, compiled a list of parish church dedications called *Thesaurus Rerum Ecclesiastiarum*. Willis published this in 1742 under Ecton's name. Willis had trouble finding Devon church dedications and to complete his study he decided that the date of the local fair coincided with the saint's day of the parish church. Orme gave comprehensive reasons why this and other of Willis' assumptions were wrong. Although in some places the medieval fair was held to coincide with the time when people were already taking a holiday to commemorate the saint's day of the parish church, in other places the two did not go together. It is true that Bovey Tracey's medieval fair was held at the time of Thomas Becket's saint's day, but there are several churches dedicated to Thomas Becket whose fairs are not on the saint's day. Also some places with fairs on Thomas Becket's saint's day do not have a church dedication to him. It was only after 1742 and the publication of Ecton's work that Thomas Becket's name was assumed for Bovey Tracey parish church although no actual dedication had been made.

To compound the story, in 1883, William Ellis, a man born in Bovey Tracey who had emigrated to America, wrote entertaining columns on his home town for his local American newspaper. He wrote about the legends of Bovey Tracey and in true gothic fashion made them as exciting as he could. He had tales of nuns and priories, a poor orphan girl marrying the lord of the manor and such like. Ellis was the first person to suggest that William de Tracy, one of the murderers of Thomas Becket Archbishop of Canterbury in 1170, was lord of the manor of Bovey Tracey. However William was not the lord of Bovey Tracey.² Ellis went on to give a lurid account of a spiritual relationship between William de Tracy's wife and Thomas Becket from 1153-1170, and that she lived in the Manor House where she entertained Becket, yet no manor house is known to have existed at that time, and Becket is not recorded as having visited the area. After a while Ellis said his stories were just legends, but people seemed to want to believe them as fact. Not long after he wrote them his columns were re-printed in a Devon local newspaper, and in 1930 they were printed privately by the wife of William Hole, the locally respected and influential owner of Parke.³ Although she, and some other later local historians also pointed out they were just legends unfortunately the tales of Thomas Becket's link with Bovey Tracey parish church continued to be repeated by other local historians who had not checked the facts.⁴

The fabric of Bovey Tracey parish church is not of the date when William de Tracy murdered Thomas Becket in 1170. It is of the fourteenth Century, too late for any William de Tracy link. Ellis also said Becket visited a nunnery at Indio and a Priory at Hind Street, but such institutions did not exist.⁵ Embellishing the story Ellis went on to state that in 1171 William Tracy, to expiate his sin of murder, erected a new church in Bovey Tracey, which the Bishop of Exeter re-dedicated from St Mary to St Thomas in 1176. There is no record of any of this in the Bishop's Registers. The registers stated the dedication as being to Saints Peter and Paul. Previous antiquarians made no mention of this church re-building and dedication legend. The earliest local history of any length was compiled by Rev. John Pike Jones, who was born in Chudleigh. His manuscript from 1810-1852 made no reference to the William Tracy legend. Jones' work was incorporated in the manuscript on the history of the Hundred of Teignbridge written by Rev. H. Fulford Williams in the 1960s. His section on Bovey Tracey likewise made no mention of the William de Tracey legend.⁶

We have already seen that William de Tracy was not one of the lords of the manor of Bovey Tracey. The Tracey lords of the Bovey manor were Oliver and Henry de Tracy. The medieval historian Nicholas Vincent has succinctly explained that William de Tracy was from a different branch of the de Tracy family.⁷ It is therefore most unlikely that he would have asked the bishop to dedicate Bovey Tracey parish church to St Thomas Becket. If William de Tracy was going to make such a dedication to Thomas Becket it would be more likely that he would do so for the church in one of his own manors such as Bradninch or Moretonhampstead. However Bradninch was dedicated to St Denis and Moretonhampstead to St Andrew. In 1911 Croslegh wrote a comprehensive history of Bradninch.⁸ Although William de Tracy was lord of its manor that town does not have any legends about him and Thomas Becket. It would seem that the name of Tracy connected with Bovey Tracey was just too tempting for local writers to stick with the facts.

In conclusion the fabric of Bovey Tracey parish church is not of the date when William de Tracy murdered Thomas Becket in 1170. It is of the fourteenth Century, too late for any William de Tracy link.⁹ However as Orme has pointed out once church signs have been written and local people make a patron saint assumption which is liked, then even if the history does not support the dedication, 'it would be a bold bishop who set out to regularize them now'.¹⁰

LADY MARGARET BEAUFORT

The other legends connected with the parish church concern Lady Margaret Beaufort. The first local historian to publish these claims was Armitage Hargreaves in 1968.¹¹ She stated that Lady Margaret Beaufort paid for the re-furnishing of the church with a magnificent rood screen, pulpit and

three misericords, and also that she probably founded a college of scribes near the church. Hargreaves did not provide references for these assertions. The supporting evidence for the establishment of a college of scribes is the medieval misericords in the chancel and the area known as 'College' in the street beside the church. (Fig. 2) Misericords can be associated with colleges and cathedrals as they were used for the clergy who needed to rest their limbs during long church services associated with the functions of a college. The Bishops' registers made no reference to any college being established at Bovey Tracey. There is no record of any benefactor. At the time of the dissolution of the monasteries no college was mentioned. There are no records at all to support that there ever was such a college at Bovey Tracey. The possibility is that these seats were acquired during the dissolution and used by local gentry and this is the most likely explanation given that there is no historical evidence for any other purpose.¹²



Figure 2. Area known as College, David Lewis collection with his kind permission.

The name of the area below the church is still known as 'College' and this appellation appeared first in a 1770 surveyor's plan drawn for the Hole family in connection with litigation regarding the nearby fields.¹³ Why would college be the name if there never was a college? There are records for the term being used to describe a group of buildings used for a purpose such as in the wool trade. In 1745 a group of buildings referred to as a college of tenements was in the possession of John Fowler a sergemaker in Cullompton. Similarly in Tiverton in 1756 the sergemaker Peter Holland owned a college of tenements forming a court; and in 1767 the sergemaker James Pulling also owned a different a college of tenements.¹⁴ On the census records for Chudleigh from 1851- 1891 there was an area of cottages near the mill in Clifford Street referred to as 'College', and I am grateful to Richard Harris whose forebears lived there for drawing this to my attention. A newspaper advertisement confirmed that these were newly built and then called College in 1819.¹⁵ Chudleigh History Society web page states that this area called college was once part of the George Inn. When the landowner developed the site in the late 1700s he called three of the premises 'The College', not an unusual thing to do when you consider an area in Exeter was named Horseguards Parade rather than cholera pit. The likelihood is that the group of buildings near the church in Bovey Tracey formed a college of such buildings, or that similarly to Chudleigh they were newly built and named college at some time.

There is no suggestion that any of these college areas in Cullompton, Tiverton or Chudleigh was ever a college of scribes. The buildings might previously have had ownership connected with a religious setting as was not uncommon. People left their property for religious purposes and in this way religious foundations might make income from renting them out. Joyce Youings in her work on the dissolution of the monasteries in Devon gave many examples of religious houses previously owning such tenements.¹⁶ This type of ownership might have given rise to the name 'college'.

In conclusion there are no records of a college of scribes in Bovey Tracey. The name college for the area might have arisen from earlier religious ownership or the presence of a group of buildings for woolworking, or both. Again it has been too tempting for local historians to make an assumption about the name of the area and then build a story based on Lady Margaret Beaufort without any evidence to back it up.

What connection did Lady Margaret have with Bovey Tracey for Hargreaves to make her claims? In 1487 Lady Margaret Beaufort became lord of the manor as part of the great grant made to her by her son King Henry VII. This was at a time of much church re-furbishment in England. Lady Margaret Beaufort was known to have been a benefactor of religious establishments and in particular she founded Christ's and St John's Colleges in Cambridge. She kept meticulous accounts and there is written evidence that she was a benefactor in Devon by funding Sampford Peverell's water supply, church, and a rectory where she sometimes stayed; the house for the rector of Great Torrington; and the establishment of a guild of tanners and shoemakers at Barnstaple church. There is no record of her endowing anything in Bovey Tracey. If she had done so it is likely it would have been recorded. All that can be said is she was Lord of the Manor and the parish church in Bovey Tracey does have some beautiful medieval furnishings which might date from the time of her lordship, and someone must have paid for them.

There is no record of Lady Margaret Beaufort ever having visited Bovey Tracey. She held sixteen Devon manors or estates as well as other extensive properties throughout England and there is no connecting reason why she would have chosen re-furbish Bovey Tracey church. Perhaps Hargreaves was persuaded of Lady Margaret's benefaction by the de Beaufort coat of arms in the church. It does illustrate the lordship connection with Bovey Tracey but not more than this. The window is in a WWII memorial so is of recent provenance. (Fig. 3)



Figure 3. Coat of Arms of Lady Margaret Beaufort, in centre WWII memorial, St Peter, St Paul and St Thomas of Canterbury, Bovey Tracey. Frances Billinge 2015 by kind permission of the Vicar and Warden.

As we have seen there are records of Lady Margaret Beaufort, as lord of the manor, endowing the churches or other parts of the towns of Barnstaple, Great Torrington and Sampford Peverell. Why did she favour these places? The answers help us understand even more that there would have been no reason for her to have endowed Bovey Tracey church. Barnstaple was an important town with a

medieval castle. Sampford Peverell was a place where Lady Margaret was recorded as having stayed so there was a connection which led to supporting that parish church. In 1490 Henry VII, the son of Lady Margaret Beaufort, gave a license to Robert Bishop of Bath and Wells, Reynold Bray Knight, and William Hody Chief Baron of the Exchequer and others to alienate the manor and borough of Sampford Peverell to Richard Bishop of London, and Richard Skypton clerk.¹⁷ This shows that men of very high status were connected with Sampford Peverell and these were people with whom Lady Margaret would have been familiar. The cleric of Great Torrington was David Hopton and there are three plaques to Hopton's memory in Exeter Cathedral, he was an archdeacon of that cathedral from 1482 until his death in 1492, he was also a Canon of Windsor from 1742-1492, and a clerk of the King's closet. That Lady Margaret Beaufort gave him her manor house at Great Torrington to use as a vicarage so that as an old man he did not have to walk so far to the parish church gives the impression of her helping an aged country parson. She was helping an aged man, but he was no isolated rural cleric, he was a man who moved in high places.¹⁸

Bovey Tracey is not the only place where legends have been embroidered and persisted. It does not need the legends as it has a beautiful church and plenty of historical facts describing it as an important royal manor and market town from medieval times.

REFERENCES

¹ Nicholas Orme, **1996**. *English Church Dedications* (University of Exeter Press Press) p. 10, dedication explained p.134; **2016**, pers. comm. regarding misericords.

² Frances Billinge, 2016. The Lords of the Historic Manor of Bovey Tracey. *Rep.Trans. Devon. Ass. Advmt Sci.*,**148**, 63-68.

³ M.A. Hole **1930**, *Bovey Tracey and District*. Reprint of Ellis' American newspaper columns meant they had a wider distribution in the locality, pp. 3-12, 67,71 cover the Becket and Tracey legend.

⁴ Sheila Winkles, The Parish Church of St Peter, Paul and Thomas of Canterbury', in Veronica Kennedy, ed, 2004, **The Bovey Book** (Cottage Publishing Bovey Tracey 2004) p. 79; Armitage Hargreaves, *Bovey Tracey History and Legend* (Mid-Devon newspaper Co. Ltd, 1968), 26-27; Lance Tregonning, *Bovey Tracey An Ancient Town* (Cottage Publishing, Bovey Tracey 1993) 17, 88-9; Veronica Kennedy, *The Bovey Book* (Cottage Publishing, Bovey Tracey 2004) 106; Elizabeth Westwood, *Bovey Tracey Rediscovered* (Combe Meadow Publishing, Bovey Tracey 2012) 36, 69, are all local guide books describing the William de Tracy, Thomas Becket, and Lady Margaret Beaufort legends.

⁵ Billinge, Frances, 2016. The Meaning and History of Indio in Bovey Tracey, and the Legend of its Nunnery. *The Devon Historian*, 85, 23-38.

⁶ Rev. J.P. Jones **1810-1852**, manuscript on Bovey Tracey is included in the Rev. H. Fulford Williams manuscript on the history of the Hundred of Teignbridge, 1960s, held at the Devon heritage Centre, 1070Z.

⁷ Nicholas Vincent, **2016**. 'Becket's Murder: The Somerset Connection' lecture held at The Museum of Somerset 3 February 2016, and personal communication confirm no evidence of a medieval Becket link with Bovey Tracey; Nicholas Vincent, 2017. 'Who Murdered Becket; The Moretonhampstead Connection', lecture held at Moretonhampstead 27 March 2017 re-confirmed that William de Tracy had no link with Bovey Tracey and the addition of Thomas Becket to the parish church dedication is fairly recent; Nicholas Vincent, **2003**. *The Murderers of Thomas Becket in Murder of Bishops* eds Natalie Fryde and Dick Reitz, (Max Planck Institute, Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, Gottingen) pp 211-272.

⁸ Rev. Charles Croslegh, 1911. *Bradinch* (London, Alexander Moring Ltd, The De La Mare Press).

⁹ John Allan, 2106, personal communication. The church architecture is fourteenth century and so too late to support the William de Tracy re-building legend.

¹⁰ Orme, 1996, see note 1.

¹¹ Hargreaves, 1968, see note 4.

¹² Orme, 2016, see note 1.

¹³ Devon Heritage Centre, 312M/EH/217: Plan of Tracey's Pond and Bovey Tracey drawn for use in the case of disputed rights of entry Steer vs Hole and Flood c. 1770.

¹⁴ Tiverton and Cullompton Colleges of tenements are referred to in Stanley D.Chapman, **1978**. *The Devon Cloth Industry in the Eighteenth Century*, (Devon and Cornwall Record Society, New Series) vol. 23, pp.46, 134-5.

¹⁵ *Trewman's Exeter Flying Post*, 18 February 1819, p. 4 'Three newly built houses called The College'.

¹⁶ Joyce Youings, **1955**. *Devon Monastic Lands: Calendar of Particulars for Grants 1536-1558*, (Devon and Cornwall Record Society, New Series, I). p.70 described Torre Abbey having owned ten tenements with their gardens and this is just one example of many similar possessions throughout Devon.

¹⁷ Calendar of Patent Rolls, 10 November 1490, Henry VII.

¹⁸ Thomas Worth, *Exeter Cathedral and its Restoration* 1878, (William Pollard Exeter) refers to David Hopton archdeacon and that in his will of 1491 he left vestments and other items to St Andrew's chapel, p.45; John Jenkins, **2010**. Torre Abbey (Unpublished D.Phil. thesis Oxford, University of Oxford) p.217; *Fasti Exeter 1300-1541*, pp. 5, 14, and Calendar of Patent Rolls, Henry VII, page 336 vol. 2, are the earliest references to David Hopton as archdeacon of Exeter.