

*Heresy, unseemly brawls, ruffianly adventurers, instigated mobs and a gallon of wine for the Bishop!
It's...*

St John's Devizes: Some Historical Nuggets

by Mark Harrison, 2019

Sources: mainly *The Book of Devizes* by Bradby (1985) and *A History of Wiltshire* (1975) by Baggs *et al.*

1086 Devizes is *not* mentioned in the Domesday Book, though there would probably have been a minor settlement around the first (wooden) Castle which was built around 1080.

1113 The Castle burns down and, by 1120, has been rebuilt in stone by Roger, Bishop of Salisbury. Roger caught the eye of the future Henry I in 1096 for his speed at saying the Mass.

1139 King Stephen attacks the Castle and claims it for his own, locking Bishop Roger in a cowshed. Later, Devizes is taken by a 'ruffianly Flemish adventurer' called Robert FitzHubert who boasted of burning 80 monks to death in their church and who ravages the surrounding countryside.

30th September. Empress Matilda lands in Dorset to claim the English throne from Stephen. The 'simple rustics' of Devizes successfully besiege the Castle in favour of Matilda.

11th December. Bishop Roger dies.

1141 Matilda establishes her stronghold in Devizes Castle, granting the first Charter of the Borough of Devizes, exempting its traders from all tolls and customs throughout England in thanks for their service to her.

1148 Her claim to the throne having come to nothing, Matilda returns permanently to Normandy.

1150 Probable date of St Mary's (our sister church, 300 metres away) being built.

1160 **St John's is probably built by now*, standing in the outer ward of the Castle and consisting of the current Chancel, Tower and Transepts.**

1194 St John's and St Mary's are referred to as churches ('ecclesiae') and valued at 3½ marks† in an official document.

1227 The Constable of Devizes is ordered to assign the tithes from the meadow to the Rector.

1233 *29th September.* Hubert de Burgh, Justiciar of England and former Regent for Henry III, breaks out of his imprisonment by the King in the Castle and takes refuge in the chancel of St John's. The Castle Governor sends soldiers to drag him out of the church and back to the Castle where he is chained up. This violation of the ancient right of sanctuary outrages the church and Bishop Robert de Bingham comes to Devizes to demand personally that Hubert is returned to the church. The Governor refuses, so the Bishop excommunicates the whole of the Castle garrison and the Governor.

15th October. the Bishops, in London, persuade the King to order Hubert returned to the church, but the King simultaneously orders a fence to be built around the church and guarded night and day to prevent Hubert escaping.

* A date around 1130 is often suggested, which is tempting to believe since it would mean that both Roger and Matilda would have known the church and possibly even worshipped here. However, separate estimates by Pevsner, Bradby, Brock and Stalley all place its construction well into the 1150s.

† 3½ marks in 1194 would be worth several thousand pounds in 2018.

30th October: a troop of horsemen break into the churchyard, scatter the Sherriff's men and ride off with Hubert to Wales where he joins the Earl of Pembroke's rebellion against Henry III.

1268 John, chaplain of the King's Chapel in the Castle, is also Rector of St John's and St Mary's.

1392 The Mayor of Devizes, Richard Cardmaker, settles lands in the borough to pay for a priest to say Masses at St Leonard's Altar in St John's for the souls of defunct royalty.

1400s The church is rebuilt with a considerably larger Perpendicular nave.

1428 St John's is valued at £9[‡].

1480 The Hungerford Chapel is built. From the 1830s onwards, it is known as the Beauchamp Chapel.

1489 By now, St John's has a total of four altars, dedicated to St Leonard (1392), St Catherine (possibly now the Beauchamp Chapel), the Trinity (also probably within the Beauchamp Chapel) and Our Lady & St George.

1507 William Prior from Devizes is burned to death at Salisbury for heresy. He was a Lollard, believing that the Bible and church services should be said in English rather than Latin.

1514 John Bent of Chirton protests against the use of images and sacraments in the church and has to walk the streets of Devizes clad in a white sheet and holding a candle as punishment.

1517 Bent renounces his recantation and is burned to death in the Market Place.

1548 An official return states that 900 people in Devizes took communion.

1550 The church's altars are 'plucked down', the chancel is covered in 'whygt lyme', the Ten Commandments are written on the walls and the organs and rood-loft are removed.

1552 The churchwardens purchase copies of the new Book of Common Prayer.

1553 Edward VI's commissioners visit, taking a 14-ounce (400 gram) chalice away with them, along with 5½ ounces (160 grams) of other precious metal plate.

1554 The high altar is rebuilt in stone; the organs, rood-loft, candlesticks and vestments are restored.

1556 John Swep of Poulshot is charged with wearing a hat on Corpus Christi Day[§], in contravention of a statute. Incense, holy oil and a holy water pot are purchased. Also at this time, three separate brewers are licensed within the parish.

1559 A man is imprisoned by the town council for refusing to pay 2½ pence^{**} towards the cost of bread and wine for Communion services.

1561 The rood loft is removed once again.

1571 Thomas Hull complains to the Bishop of Salisbury that plate, jewels and ornaments (including 'a fair great cross' worth £30^{††}, two censers and a pyx) have been sold by the churchwardens who were dishonestly holding on to the proceeds.

[‡] £9 in 1428 would be worth over £10,000 in 2018.

[§] Corpus Christi Day is the Thursday after Trinity Sunday; in 1556 it would have fallen on June 4th.

^{**} 2½ pence in 1559 would be worth about £5 in 2018. It seems that a door-to-door collection was made in the town each week with each house contributing in turn to provide the elements for Communion services.

^{††} £30 in 1571 would be worth more than £15,000 in 2018.

- 1576 The Ten Commandments are re-inscribed on the walls. Bread and wine are bought for only five communicants.
- 1606 The Borough pays the churchwardens ‘towards the beautifying’ of St John’s.
- 1610 The earliest of the surviving church bells is cast.
- 1614 The Borough pays for the path through the churchyard to be paved.
- 1620 The Borough pays for ‘a pottle of sacke and a pottle of claret wine’ for a visitation by the Bishop of Salisbury. A pottle is half a gallon, so nearly 5 litres of wine was bought altogether.
- 1624 Renovatus (‘Redeemed’) Jessop, a puritan, is licensed by the Bishop to preach at St John’s
- 1628 The Rector’s annual stipend is £40[‡].
- 1643 *11th July*: William Waller’s Parliamentary army bombards Devizes. St John’s church roof is stripped of its lead by the Royalists to make bullets. There is fighting in the streets for hours and it is possibly on this day that the pockmarks of canister shot that can still be seen on the outer east wall of St John’s were made.
- 1646 *6th September*: John Shepherd, the Rector, is commanded to leave the pulpit during a service by a captain, some soldiers and two other preachers, saying he is unfit to preach. Some of the congregation write to their MP to complain. He continues as Rector until his death in 1652.
- 1647 It is decided that the church bell should be rung daily at 4am in the winter months.
- 1655 The curfew, which had previously been rung at 8pm every night, is changed to 9pm.
- 1658 Samuel Noyes, the leader of the town’s Quakers, is arrested for brawling in church.
- 1661 The Bishop of Salisbury (the gloriously named Humphrey Henchman) visits Devizes and finds the people ‘not good’, though owing to the excellence of the Rector they were giving ‘very little trouble’. He later supplements the Rector’s stipend out of his own pocket.
- 1662 73 parishioners of St John’s are prosecuted for not attending church. The Rector asks that some of them not be charged since they have repented and begun to conform.
- 1670 Devizes gains a reputation for being one of two main locations in the Diocese where there are ‘great and outrageous meetings’ of non-conformists.

- 1704 The Rector collects 4 pence^{§§} from every woman ‘churched’ (a service carried out after childbirth)
- 1707 There is an ‘unseemly brawl’ between two of Devizes’ Mayors about who may sit in the Mayoral pew. For some time now, two Mayors have been separately elected by different factions on the Council and tensions run high until 1713 when the matter is resolved.
- 1738 Williams Wells, a High Church Tory, becomes Rector and is less tolerant of non-conformism than previous incumbents.
- 1743 An organ is installed.
- 1747 John Wesley visits Devizes to preach. Edward Innes, the Curate of St John’s (and, later, its Rector), incites a mob to uproar ‘as if the French were just entering’ by announcing that Wesley would exhibit ‘an obnoxious, pantomime entertainment’. Wesley hears an ‘abundance of swelling words, oaths, curses and threatenings’ but the mob eventually calms and listens a little.
- 1748 Innes once again incites a mob, this time to attack a house where Charles Wesley is preaching at a house meeting. Windows are broken, the rooms flooded with use of a fire engine and Wesley barely escapes alive.

[‡] £40 in 1628 would be worth just over £10,000 in 2018.

^{§§} 4 pence in 1704 would be worth about £3.60 in 2018.

- 1751 Five young people drown in Drew's Pond after going boating on a Sunday. Their tomb, in the churchyard, extols the virtue of strictly observing the Sabbath.
- 1761 There are 1,266 cases of smallpox in the town, out of a population of about 3,000. 80 are fatal.
- 1771 Innes instigates a mob to break up an open-air prayer meeting.
- 1774 Thomas Robin's son dies after 'drinking Rum at Bull baiting at Furzhill Aged 14 years'.
- 1776 The Rectory (on Long Street) is bought by Queen Anne's Bounty.
- 1783 A morning and an evening service are held every alternate Sunday at St John's and St Mary's. Daily services are also held at one or other church. Communion is celebrated six times in the year and also on the great feast days, with about 90 people taking communion.
- 1788 The church interior is redesigned with a barrel roof and elaborate reredos, a lofty pulpit, west gallery and box pews. A schoolboy comments that it is 'very superb and elegant'.
-

- 1800 It is decided that services should be held every Sunday at both St John's and St Mary's.
- 1833 Gas is installed. The Mayor orders a house-to-house collection to help pay for the organist.
- 1837 The Mayor complains about having to pay two guineas*** to rent his mayoral pew which, as a dissenter, he would barely ever use. In response, the Rector removes the pew reserved for the Mayor and the Corporation. The Mayor complains to the Chancellor of the Diocese who refuses to intervene. The Corporation threatens to sue the churchwardens but the matter seems to have been dropped.
- 1838 The Rector – a high churchman – complains to the council that distributions of cloth to poor people is depriving churchmen and instead helping 'dissenters and radicals'.
- 1841 Dr Brabant issues a leaflet complaining about the practice of renting pews in the church.
- 1844 **The chancel plasterwork (see 1788) is removed and the imitation 12th century arcading is added.**
- 1845 The Rector, Edward Phipps, arouses public protest for his 'ritualistic practices'.
- 1850 A County meeting, summoned to protest against papal 'aggression', refuses to allow the Rector to speak. The next month, a protest is sent to the Bishop (then Edward Denison) about him.
- 1852 A sermon is preached by the Curate on the Real Presence of Christ in the Bread and Wine, resulting in actions in the Church courts.
- 1853 The doors at St Mary's are locked against the Rector, who leaves Devizes soon afterwards.
- 1863 **The nave, which had been leaning dangerously, is extended by one bay westwards on the advice of George Gilbert Scott. The west wall is rebuilt in imitation of 15th century style. The west gallery (built 1788) is demolished as part of the works.**
- 1864 Communion is held weekly at St John's in Lent and Advent and monthly at other times. Average attendance is 70.
- 1875 The practice of ringing the bell in the early morning – which by now takes place daily at 6am – is ceased (see 1647).
-

- 1902 The organ is moved into the North transept.

*** Two guineas in 1837 would be worth more than £100 in 2018.