

John of Pitney.

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ON the west front of Wells Cathedral Church, near the middle and on the level of the eye, the following inscription is carved in large and deeply cut letters :

† PVR : LALME : IOHAN :
DE : PVTTENIE PRIEZ :
ET : TREZE : IVRS : DE :

The inscription is incomplete : it is plain that no more was cut ; and it is also reasonably certain that it has not been brought from some other place, but was originally carved in its present position. It would appear therefore that for some reason the mason's hand was stayed before he had completed his task.

We have to ask, first, how is the inscription to be completed and how is it to be interpreted ; secondly, who is this John of Puttenie, or Pitney, who is thus commemorated ; and lastly, how can we account for the prominence of its position and also for its incompleteness.

1. In a paper on Wiltshire Pardons or Indulgences (reprinted from the *Wiltshire Archæological Magazine*, Vol. xxxviii, p. 15), Canon Christopher Wordsworth, the learned Subdean of Salisbury, explains the growth of the system of Indulgences, and shews that it was customary for a bishop to remit on various grounds certain days of "enjoined penance," that is to say, of ecclesiastically imposed temporal punishment which had been meted out for special offences. "*Plenary indulgences*," he says, "remit all, *partial indulgences* remit a

portion of the temporal punishment due to sin: for example, an indulgence of forty days remits as much temporal punishment as would have been atoned for by forty days of canonical penance."

In the course of this paper Canon Wordsworth cites a Salisbury document, according to which the Bishop of St. Asaph in 1271 issued a pardon of thirteen days' enjoined penance, available for "all persons truly contrite, confessed, and really penitent, who should recite the Lord's Prayer and the Salutation of B.V. Mary with a faithful mind for the souls of Giles late Bishop and Simon de Bridport late Treasurer at the tomb before the altar of B. Mary Magdalen." The tomb of Giles de Bridport, who had been dean of Wells before he was made bishop of Salisbury, is one of the most beautiful monuments in Salisbury Cathedral Church. From this and similar examples it is evident that the Wells inscription is an indulgence of thirteen days' enjoined penance, granted to such penitent persons as should of their charity pray for the soul of John of Pitney. In a private communication Canon Wordsworth suggests that the inscription is to be completed by the addition of two words, such as **PARDON AVEREZ**. This would make a rhymed couplet, after the fashion of the time:

Pour l'alme Johan de Puttenie priez,
Et treize jurs de pardon avez.

2. Who then was John of Pitney, and when and where did he live? His name at once indicates that he was born at Pitney, two miles from Langport in Somerset. The very beautiful lettering of the inscription finds a close parallel on a stone recently brought to light which contains part of the word **BVRWOLDVS**, which formerly stood on the monument of the Saxon bishop Burwold in the south choir aisle at Wells. There is reason for thinking that this was carved about the year 1325. We are justified therefore in looking for our John of Pitney in the first half of the fourteenth century:

and indeed it is just at this point that we come across the only person of that name whom we know. The records of the Dean and Chapter are ignorant of him: he does not appear to have been a prebendary, or to have had any connexion with the Cathedral Church. But the registers of Bishops John de Drokensford and Ralph de Salopia enable us to trace his career somewhat exactly.

On 19 May 1318 the former of these bishops granted a dispensation to John de Puttony, allowing him, though illegitimate, to take minor orders and to hold a sinecure benefice; and on the same day he conferred on him the tonsure (*Drok.* p. 12: ed. *Som. Rec. Soc.*). It is quite possible that his illegitimacy may indicate that his father was a priest: for, though priests were frequently married men, their wedlock was under the ban of the Church, and their sons could not take holy orders without a special dispensation.

On 9 April 1323 he was instituted rector of Perrot, near Crewkerne, on the presentation of the patron, Sir Henry de L'Orti. As however he was found to be insufficient "in chanting and for the cure of souls," he was required to nominate to the bishop for examination a chaplain who should perform the duties for one year (*Drok.* p. 216).

On 17 May of the same year he petitioned to be ordained subdeacon. The bishops of this diocese rarely conferred holy orders themselves at this period, and generally gave their candidates letters dimissory to some other bishop who might be holding an ordination. Bishop John de Drokensford happened to be at Wanton in the diocese of Winchester, and he compromised for the present by granting John of Pitney an indemnity for the postponement of his ordination. Then on 3 November he gave him letters dimissory for subdeacon's orders: and a year later he received similar letters for priest's orders, 2 Sep. 1324 (*Drok.* pp. 222, 227, 235).

We do not hear of him again for more than twenty years. Then we find from Bishop Ralph's register (p. 518) that on

11 October 1345 he was admitted to the perpetual chantry of St. Mary in the cemetery of Crewkerne, on the presentation of the Earl of Devon, Hugh de Courtenay, in exchange for the church of North Perrott.

He did not hold his new benefice for long: for we find a fresh appointment to this chantry on the last days of March 1349. We can have little doubt therefore that he was one of the many Somerset clergymen who were carried off by the Black Death.

3. We have lastly to try to account for the position of the inscription, and for the fact that it was never completed. First, we may remember that the west front of Wells faced the general burial ground for those who were not members of the Cathedral Church. It is possible that John de Pitney died in Wells, and was buried not far from the place where the inscription yet remains. A close parallel is offered by an inscription cut on the second buttress from the east end, on the south side of the south wall of the Lady Chapel at Salisbury. A considerable portion has been obliterated, but Canon Wordsworth proposes the following restoration of it in the paper to which we have referred:

XIII d[ies ve]nie o[r]acion[em dom]inicam dicen[tibus cum] V
salutac[i]onibus bea]te virgin[is pro anim]a Angnet[is heic
req]uiascent[is].

The date, *c.* 1270, which he assigns to this is only conjectural. It is interesting to note that here again the number of days granted is only thirteen: at a later period twenty or forty days were commonly granted.

But why was our Wells inscription left unfinished? We can but guess at the answer to this question. We might suppose that its carving in such a place was unauthorised, and owing to the confusion of that terrible year was only observed as it neared its completion. But then, deeply cut though it was, it would probably have been obliterated. Is it too bold a conjecture to suggest that the mason's hand was stayed by the pestilence itself?