Presentation five. “‘The Northern Way’: the Archbishops of York and the North of England, 1304-1405”.

The Collections of The National Archives.

Dr Jonathan Mackman.

[SLIDE 1] The Northern Way project is highlighting just what a fantastic source the registers of the medieval archbishops of York are for anyone interested in the archbishops, their activities and the northern church in general - and obviously the same is true for the registers of bishops in every other diocese across the country. But the church did not act in isolation, and another major part of ‘The Northern Way’ project has been to look at the interaction between the northern church and the royal government. I’m Dr Jonathan Mackman, and my main role in this project has been to search through the collections held by The National Archives, and to assemble information from particular series for use by the whole project team in interpreting the content of the registers and the activities of the archbishops and their colleagues.

[SLIDE 2] The Church dominated life in medieval England. On one level it was a spiritual body, concerned with the lives and souls of its followers, and its influence spread into all manner of related areas, from art and architecture, to music, healthcare and charity. But the Church was also: an administrative institution; an employer; a judicial body; and a major land-holder; all of which meant a huge amount of contact with the wider population, and with all manner of administrative, legislative and legal bodies. All this left a lot of records, many of which still survive today, and particularly amongst the collections at The National Archives. In fact, it’s difficult to think of a single series within the medieval collections there that wouldn’t contain at least something relating to the church or the clergy in some way.

But for this project, we’ve mainly concentrated on series which best illustrate the relationship between the Crown and the archbishops themselves, and which tie in with the registers surviving in York. Many of the register entries relate to interactions between Church and state, and so issues which appear in the registers can often be followed up within the royal records, and vice-versa, and this presentation will examine a number of those areas.

[SLIDE 3] One particular area where the two administrations worked hand in hand was in the appointment of clergy. There were numerous churches, chapels and other institutions where the king held the right to present the rector, vicar or other incumbent, and many other situations when the Crown held those rights temporarily, such as when the holder was under-age, or during vacancies in offices. Presentations to posts were often enrolled on the patent roll, effectively a record of the government’s ‘out-letters’, and the subsequent institutions can then often be found in the registers. Many presentations, however, despite being enrolled, were never carried through and the candidates were never instituted. There were various reasons for this; the right of presentation could have been disputed and the Crown was simply trying its luck; the king may have been misinformed and the benefice was not actually vacant; or the candidate might have been unsuitable or have died before institution. But despite never being fulfilled, such presentations can still tell us a lot about links of patronage, and point towards wider disputes. But as a simple example, on 1 December 1351, Edward III presented William de Sandeford to the church of Escrick, near York. As shown here, the medieval patent rolls have all been published in English calendar form, but the originals are also available at The National Archives.

[SLIDE 4] A few months later, on 22 March 1352, the archbishop issued letters instituting Sandeford to that church and ordering his induction. The subsequent entry in the register also shows why this was happening, as on that same day the previous rector, William de Ellerton, formally resigned Escrick in exchange for the church of Musgrave in Carlisle diocese. Sandeford was almost certainly a royal clerk, and it’s likely that this was the king rewarding one of his servants, with the archbishop’s help. So by adding the two sets of records together, we now have a much more detailed picture of what was going on.

[SLIDE 5] This was a relatively simple case, but the royal administration was much more involved in the appointment of higher clergy, particularly abbots and priors, and even the archbishops themselves. So for example, in this register entry probably dating to late-March 1366, Archbishop John Thoresby asked two commissioners to visit the prior of Newstead in Nottinghamshire, to find out why he had asked for permission to resign.

[SLIDE 6] Presumably they found nothing untoward, and on 22 April, the sub-prior and canons of Newstead wrote to the king, requesting a licence to elect a new prior. Their letter survives at The National Archives, in series C 84, and as was standard, the licence was granted almost immediately, on 6 May 1366, and was enrolled on the patent roll.

[SLIDE 7]. The canons of Newstead then held their election, and on 9 May they wrote again to the king, asking him to accept their newly-elected prior, William de Allerton, and to inform the archbishop.

[SLIDE 8] The king wrote to the archbishop on 12 May, and the archbishop’s confirmation is recorded in his register.

[SLIDE 9] This confirmation of the election is accompanied in the register by the text of the new prior’s oath of obedience, which he swore in the chapel at Bishopthorpe on 28 May, and also an order to the archdeacon of Nottingham to install him in the priory.

[SLIDE 10] This whole process took around six weeks, and a lot of parchment…..!!

Another major area where the church relied on co-operation with the state was in the enforcement of excommunications. People suffering excommunication were given 40 days to make their penance, but if they failed to do that, the church itself had no enforcement powers of its own. Instead, a document known as a signification would be sent to the king, asking that the miscreant be arrested and brought back before the Church authorities. Again, hundreds of these significations survive in The National Archives.

[SLIDE 11] So for instance, on 20 March 1307, Archbishop Greenfield wrote to Edward I, asking that he order the arrest of Alan de Walkington, a priest, and Simon de Wath, the executors of one Margery Ousefleet. The fact that they’re specified as executors suggests that this related to some failure in those roles, but unfortunately each diocese drew up their certifications slightly differently, and fourteenth-century York ones almost never specify the reason.

[SLIDE 12] In this case the king clearly acted swiftly, as Greenfield’s register records another letter sent around six weeks later, asking that Wath be released from custody as the matter had been resolved (there’s no sign of Walkington’s fate). In some cases, these letters also survive at The National Archives, but the fact that they only rarely survive in both places suggest that only certain examples were recorded in the registers, and many of the originals are probably lost.

[SLIDE 13] These documents also show the variety of people who suffered excommunication. The number of women in these records is particularly striking, and status was certainly no barrier. In 1385, the king was asked to arrest Sir William Neville of Pickhill, a prominent member of the Yorkshire gentry. While it wasn’t unusual for such people to be excommunicated, in this case Neville’s arrest was being sought by one of his own relatives, Archbishop Alexander Neville, and had been prompted by a complaint by William’s own wife.

[SLIDE 14] Another particularly informative document dates from 1314, when Archbishop Greenfield wrote to Edward II, asking him to order the arrest of the abbot and monks of Rufford Abbey in Nottinghamshire. The excommunication of monks, and even of abbots and priors, wasn’t uncommon, and was often the result of disputes over money, property or other rights. But while these documents were not unusual, this certification is very unusual because it lists the names and offices of what was clearly most, if not all, of the monks of Rufford at that time, information that very rarely survives. For a lot of medieval abbeys we often don’t even know the names of the abbots, let alone the monks.

[SLIDE 15] This particular case also takes us into another important series of documents at The National Archives – those which relate to the process of petitioning. The hundreds of entries which are recorded on the patent rolls - like the appointment to Escrick highlighted earlier - did not appear spontaneously. Many, if not most, had their origins in requests made to the Crown by individual people, groups or institutions. Anyone could petition the Crown, on anything and everything, from financial assistance to helping with troublesome neighbours – the medieval equivalent of writing to your MP! In many ways, these petitions are some of the most revealing documents in the whole of The National Archives’ collections, and many of them were fully catalogued by another University of York project a few years ago.

[SLIDE 16] A few months after the archbishop asked for their arrest, the abbot and monks of Rufford petitioned Parliament on this same matter, and their original petition survives, as does a copy included on the official roll for that Parliament, which met at Westminster on 20 January 1315. The monks complained that the rector of Kneesall had sued them in the church courts for tithes supposedly due to him, but the abbey’s proctor had failed to turn up and thus they automatically lost the case. They had appealed, but in the meantime the archbishop had excommunicated them, and had started the signification process; some of the monks had been arrested, and the rest were apparently fugitives. They asked for the process to be stopped, and although the petition was rejected, a resolution was eventually found, and in June 1315 the king was asked to cancel the arrests.

[SLIDE 17] Again, that document survives, and also lists the names of the individual monks.

[SLIDE 18] Of course, the archbishops themselves also petitioned the king. Archbishop Melton was a regular petitioner, on subjects such as his rights in the liberties of Ripon and Beverley, wine taxes in the port of Hull, and various allegations brought against him by his political enemies.

[SLIDE 19] But the process worked both ways. Some of the most interesting petitions date from the time of Archbishop Neville, in the 1370s and ‘80s. For instance, in 1388, the vicars of Beverley Minster complained how Neville had raised a mob against them, forcing them into exile in Lincoln.

[SLIDE 20] This was part of a long-running dispute between Neville and the clergy of Beverley, and around the same time, a petition from Neville’s ‘friends and kinsmen’ complained of ‘libellous bills’ attacking the archbishop, pinned up in Westminster Abbey and St Paul’s Cathedral. These ‘friends’ asked for action against the alleged libellers, and attached copies of the documents.

[SLIDE 21] One such document is probably this one, now filed in an entirely different series from the petition. Despite the damage, it’s an interesting example of a document in English, apparently written in a northern dialect, and it includes a devastating attack on Neville, describing him as a tyrant, a thief and a traitor, who had brought extortion, destruction and disease to the land. The writer was clearly no fan, and certainly got the last laugh, as Neville was stripped of his post and exiled soon after.

[SLIDE 22] As with all high-ranking Church officials, the archbishops of York were also in constant general contact with the king and his government. Again, many such letters appear in the registers, but the originals also often survive at The National Archives, though many of these letters were removed from their original context by Victorian archivists, so it’s often difficult to know exactly what was going on. For instance, at some point before 1307, the future Edward II wrote to William Melton, then an official in the prince’s household, simply telling him to answer the enclosed letter. That letter is no longer there, so we don’t know what Melton was expected to do, but other letters contain a huge wealth of information, on all sorts of subjects.

[SLIDE 23] For example, after becoming archbishop and while serving as the king’s Treasurer, Melton was appointed by Edward II to survey the defences of the Tower of London, and these two letters were sent by Melton, reporting back to the king. As was usual at this time, most of the fourteenth-century archbishops of York rose to prominence through service to the crown, and many continued to serve after becoming archbishop. The great officers of state, such as the Chancellor, the Treasurer, and the Keeper of the Privy Seal, were generally senior clerics, and while some archbishops concentrated on their new task - William Greenfield resigned as Chancellor on becoming archbishop - others, such as Melton and, later, Thomas Arundel, continued in royal service, and spent far more time serving their king than they did attending to their archdiocese.

[SLIDE 24] Of course, there are lots of other areas where the church and state authorities worked together, or came into contact. The National Archives holds hundreds of plea rolls, from various royal courts, both central and local, and these include countless cases involving clerics of all ranks, and on every possible subject from minor debt to murder. And on taxation matters, since the clergy were generally taxed separately from the laity, a whole system of paperwork was established. For instance, on 8 September 1346, Edward III asked the clergy to help fund the ongoing wars (this was only 13 days after the battle of Crécy).

[SLIDE 25] The York clergy agreed, and Archbishop Thoresby wrote to the king, saying that he could have his tax, but under certain conditions detailed in an enclosed letter.

[SLIDE 26] This again shows the vagaries of archival survival, as Thoresby’s other letter still survives, but in a totally different series to the first.

[SLIDE 27] It’s also clear that the royal and ecclesiastical administrations relied heavily on each other for information, though sometimes with varying success. In 1355, the king wrote to both Archbishop Thoresby and his own Exchequer, seeking the precise date of Archbishop Melton’s death. Strangely, the Exchequer replied with the answer, but the archbishop’s officials claimed they didn’t know! And in May 1370, the king again wrote to Archbishop Thoresby, this time asking him to check his registers for all institutions to the vicarage of Ecclesfield, near Sheffield. No reason was given, but Thoresby replied with full details going back almost 60 years. This clearly shows how the registers, just like the chancery rolls, were very much a working resource.

[SLIDE 35] Our project has mainly concentrated on specific series where documents relating to the archbishopric appear on a regular basis, but documents can appear in all parts of The National Archives collections. Many of these simply represent the intricate workings of royal government. For instance, during vacancies between archbishops, the estates of the diocese were generally taken into royal control and placed into the hands of keepers, who then submitted accounts to the royal Exchequer. Relatively few estate records survive amongst the diocesan archive, but these vacancy records remain in the Exchequer to this day. As an example, this extract for Laneham in Nottinghamshire from the vacancy of 1304-6, shows the rents collected, payments made, and even the grain stored in the barns.

[SLIDE 29 - TOMB] But for other documents, it’s not entirely clear how they ended up in The National Archives’ collections. As a final example for this presentation, in the fourteenth century, the church of Lowthorpe, near Driffield in the East Riding, was transformed into a large collegiate church by its patron, John de Heslarton. On 26 March 1333, Archbishop Melton confirmed a set of ordinances for how this new collegiate church was to be administered.

[SLIDE 30] This included the setting up of no fewer than six chantries, employing a further nine chaplains in addition to the rector. The ordinances, which were copied into Melton’s register, set out precisely what masses were to be said at each chantry, and how and where the chaplains were to dress, live and behave, covering multiple pages of the register. On 3 May, King Edward III confirmed these ordinances in his own letters patent.

[SLIDE 31] These letters were enrolled on the patent roll as usual, but, somehow, an original copy of those letters has also made its way back to the government archive. It’s a huge document, over 2 feet wide and in pretty-much perfect condition, but how it ended up in The National Archives isn’t clear. The archive of the college may simply have been confiscated when it was dissolved; or perhaps these letters were kept by the patron, and his family archive somehow made its way into royal hands?

[SLIDE 32] Either way, that document isn’t alone. A seventh chantry was later added to the church, and in October 1364 Archbishop Thoresby confirmed its establishment, his confirmation being recorded in his register as usual.

[SLIDE 33] Again the original letters also survive at The National Archives, and are just as huge and impressive as the others.

[SLIDE 33] So, to conclude, while the Archbishops’ Registers are a fantastic and fascinating source for studying the fourteenth-century church, and for all manner of local and regional history, don’t forget, they are often just the tip of the iceberg, and there’s every chance that there’s a lot more out there to find!!