

## THOMAS KEN (1637-1711)

This is a record of a talk given in St. John the Baptist Church, Winchester, in May 2017, by Elizabeth Proudman.

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**Thomas Ken** is famous for having worked in the parish of St. John's in the Soke in Winchester and there is a notice on the south wall of the Church to prove it. He was here in the 1670s when it was a very dilapidated parish full of non-conformists and Anabaptists in particular. Ken was then in his thirties and was a protégé of Bishop Morley, Bishop of Winchester.

The story everyone knows about Ken is how he refused to give Nell Gwynn lodging in his house in the Close, but there is more to him than that.

He wrote two well-known hymns for morning and evening, 'Awake my soul and with the sun' and 'Glory to thee, my God, this night for all the blessings of the light;' and the famous doxology

This area round St. John's Street was originally a Roman suburb, outside the Eastgate in the city walls and on the main road to London, and many Roman burials have been found here over the centuries. It has been suggested that the Sarsen stone built into the East end of the Church may be the remains of a very early Christian church or cross dating back into the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> centuries. What is certain is that this church building that we are in now was begun in the early 1100s, as an offshoot of St. Denys' priory in Southampton. It must have been small, with a central nave and two tiny side aisles, as you can see from the

remains of the Romanesque window in the west wall. And when the floor was re-laid in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century evidence was seen of the foundations of these outside walls.

In the early 13<sup>th</sup> century when the Bishop of Winchester was Pierre des Roches who had been a guardian of the young King John, the powerful and wealthy bishop decided to formalise all his property here outside the walls, and he created the Soke. It had its own bailiff and legal officers, and taxes were paid to the bishop and not to the King. The church was enlarged, and the aisles were widened. The great fair on St. Giles' Hill brought trade and wealth to Winchester especially to the Bishop, and by the early 1300s this was a prosperous area to live in, and the Old Blue Boar, and several other houses have been excavated towards the Alresford Road were built, and have been excavated. There were probably lots more that we do not know about. The South East window was added to the church, and probably the rood screen with its unusual door from the outside. The par screens on either side of the altar date from this period too, and there were 3 altars so that 3 Catholic priests could say mass together.

After the terrible plague of the Black Death in 1348 the new Bishop, William of Wykeham, founded his school. It was a religious foundation to educate much needed clergy after so many had died. The buildings for Winchester College which we know today were slow to get going, and to begin with the boys lived on the slopes of St. Giles' Hill. Sadly it is not known exactly where the school house was, but the new College used St. John's Church as its chapel, and after this the tower was built with the fine perpendicular arch and new windows were made east and

west. St. John's was said to be one of the richest churches in the City and one of the very few to have a stipendiary priest.

But things went badly wrong after the Reformation. The Soke collapsed as an administrative area, and St. Giles' Fair came to an end, and after Cromwell's victory in the Civil war there was no bishop to look after any parish, and St. John's became one of the most desolate parts of Winchester. But this history of the Bishops' close involvement with this area must explain why Bishop Morley, appointed Bishop of Winchester by the newly restored Charles II, was so anxious to help this parish.

### **Which is where we come to Thomas Ken.**

**Introduction:** Thomas Ken died in 1711 when he was 74 years old, and those 74 years covered an extraordinary period of English history.

He was born in 1637, and when he was 5 years old the Civil War broke out. He was 12 when Charles I was executed. During his teenage years Oliver Cromwell was in charge and Ken was a student at Winchester College.

In 1651 He must have seen Winchester Castle being blown up and destroyed by Richard Cromwell - when he was 14.

He was at Oxford in 1660 at the Restoration of the Monarchy when the town was said to have gone mad with joy.

After taking Holy Orders he became in 1665 Chaplain to Bishop Morley in Winchester, lived in the Close and began to work at St. John's and is said to have preached in our pulpit. He was Chaplain to the King when Charles II began building the King's House, in Winchester on the site of the old castle.

## **25.1. 1685 Bishop of Bath and Wells**

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6.2.1685 Charles II died.

1685 He was present at the execution of the Duke of Monmouth, trying to make him confess his guilt.

1687 Ken was one of the 'Seven Bishops' opposing James II's Declaration of Indulgence. He was sent to the Tower of London, and tried by Judge Jeffries but acquitted because of public opinion.

1688 Non-Juring Bishop. He refused to swear an oath of allegiance to William and Mary while James II was still alive.

Ken was only 52 when he was deposed from Bath and Wells in 1691 and his public life was over.

He spent the last 20 years of his life with his friend Thomas Thynne at his house, Longleat.

1711 Died.

An old book about Winchester College says that in College folk memory he shows timeless sense of rhythm of life. Liberal, steady and all-embracing. – he also wielded well a 'cricket batte', and carved his name twice into the walls of the old Cloister. So not only holy and good.

**So who was he ?**

### **CHILDHOOD**

He was born in July 1637 in Berkhamstead. His father was Thomas Ken, an attorney. Mother was a poet but not a very good one.

His much older step-sister Anne was married to Isaac Walton, the fisherman. He lived with them after his parents died.

**ISAAC WALTON:** is a very important friendship in Ken's life. B. 1595. Linen Draper in City of London. He was a very passionate royalist, and there are various possibly apocryphal tales about his activities in the protectorate. A Royal ring was stolen back from some roundhead soldiers, and Walton smuggled it back to the king in Holland.

As well as the Compleat Angler (1653), Walton wrote some very fine biographies known as the 'Lives of the Poets', including John Donne and George Herbert (1589-1633). He must have been a very stimulating guardian for the young Thomas Ken.

After the restoration of the monarchy he lived in Winchester close with his friend George Morley, the Bishop.

**GEORGE MORLEY** was a devoted royalist. He believed in Religious toleration but was a Staunch Anglican and stayed in Holland in 1648 as Chaplain to the exiled widowed Queen, Henrietta Maria, and her children.

The restored King made Morley Bishop of Winchester and he brought Walton and Ken, then newly ordained, with him.

He was small, lean, and very abstemious. He slept on floor and lived until he was 90. He only had one meal a day, didn't marry, and spent all his money on books. Morley was tolerant, but would have no hats on altar or Morris dancers in church, or dogs, or hawks.

He kept trying to reform King's morals and made King Charles II tolerant too in religious matters. Charles was not just lazy, and to an extent this was due to Morley's influence.

Morley died in 29.10.1684 He left Ken £10 and a ring. He wrote:

*I pray that there be no more heresies, no more schisms, no more sects, no more scandals, no more wars and seditions, conspiracies or rebellions among Christians.*

While he was bishop 1682 Kings new palace begun in Winchester. The new Wolvesey palace was begun, his Winchester almshouses, Morley college, endowed, and he gave his library to Winchester Cathedral.

Ken had lived through a very stormy period for education. There was a strict puritan regime, at Winchester College, and the same at Oxford. Then in 1660, Oxford, the King's loyal city, went 'stark, staring mad at the restoration'.

Ken got his BA at New College, Oxford 1661, and later an MA and became a Doctor of Divinity.

He was famous for his singing. Often to the lute, or the viol and he had an organ in his room at Winchester. It cost him £55, and was still there 100 years later. He was described as:

*'very facetious and entertaining to his friends in the evening'*

After two brief periods as a parish priest he came back to Winchester as a Fellow of the College and was in turn Sacrist, Vice Warden and Bursar. These jobs were not very taxing, but he was generous. Paid for lighting 24 sconces - £2.11sh, 2 books of Common Prayer - £3.11sh, and 5 ells of cloth for the Holy Table - £1.7.8d.

They had Holy Communion 4 times during his year of office instead of the usual three.

He published a Manual of Prayers in 1674 for Winchester scholars, 'for Wykehamists and all devout Christians'. This was popular for many years, and went into several editions. The hymns were added to later editions.

(Ken's ghost is supposed to appear to youngest college man on 8<sup>th</sup> June every year, the anniversary of his death.)

### **1669 Prebend of Winchester. (aged 32)**

He may have given up his fellowship to devote himself totally to our impoverished and strongly NON conformist Parish. It was Bishop Morley who sent Ken to St. John's.

Winchester then had 39 Presbyterians, 26 independents, 5 anabaptists – mostly in Soke, and 243 papists.

During this period he did not just work in Winchester. He had three interesting journeys.

1675 He went to Rome with Isaac Walton's son, which made him disgusted with the excesses of Catholicism,

1679 He went as Chaplain to Mary wife of William of Orange at The Hague, appointed by Bishop Compton – Bishop of London and ex-master of St. Cross, and he thoroughly disliked the ultra-protestant William and berated him for being cruel to his wife.

**1683** He went To Tangiers with Lord Dartmouth to sort out the problems of the Queen's dowry. And he went with Samuel Pepys. This is when we get a bit of personal knowledge about Ken because Pepys mentions him in his diary. He chose little Dr. Ken as chaplain, one of the saintliest churchmen of the day whose voice

*'was like to a nightingale for the sweetness of it'.*

Pepys said Ken's sermons were weak and unsuccessful; Ken was 'full of the skill of a preacher but empty of all natural philosophy – nothing in short but 'forced meat'. Later Ken preached about the vices of the town of 'Tangiers. Swearing, cursing, drinking and whoring'. Pepys and Ken agreed that it was time that God destroyed the town. Off Cape St. Vincent they had a cheerful evening when Pepys and Ken argued about ghosts. Ken believed, Pepys didn't. Afterwards they went to the Captain's cabin to drink a glass of wine and water, and partake of mighty pretty music upon the flutes in the night, and so to bed. Pepys called Ken a 'sweet-faced divine'. He walked on the parade with 'little Ken' and ate mighty good Spanish onions.

Ken is often called 'Little Ken' and also 'the little black fellow' so he must have been quite small and dark haired, although the portrait of him which hangs in the red library at Longleat shows him with white hair. Perhaps he went white young.

After he came home from Tangiers comes the famous story of Thomas Ken and Nell Gwynn. As a prebend of Winchester Cathedral he had a house in the Close. It doesn't exist any more, sadly, but it was near the Deanery, more or less where the book shop is now.



Charles II started building his great house 1683 to emulate Versailles, and Christopher Wren did the designs. The King was frequently in Winchester and he wanted his favourite Mistress, Nell Gwynn to be lodged in the Close near to his lodgings in the Deanery, so Ken's house was convenient. But when he was asked to give accommodation to Nelly he refused saying it went against his conscience.

She was lodged instead in Colebrook Street, and it is said that the door in the little passage between the East end of the Cathedral and Colebrook Street was made for the King to visit her incognito. They do say that on a misty autumn night there is the ghost of a cavalier wandering there. You only see him from the knees upwards, because his feet are on the ground at the level it was then! You can believe that if you wish!

It was soon after this that the King appointed him Bishop of Bath and Wells in 1684. It was said that Charles respected him for his courage. The King used to say '*I must go and hear little Tommy Ken tell me my faults.*'

The diarist John Evelyn knew Ken as well as Pepys and wrote about him too. Evelyn says he assisted the devotions of Charles II in his last sickness. Jan 1685 CII had a stroke and Ken tried to give him the sacrament, but he refused it and a catholic priest was smuggled in. Ken had only been Bishop for a few months.

In 1687 King James II issued his **Declaration of Indulgence**. It was to be read in all churches on five Sundays in May and June. It was

supposed to grant religious freedom to everyone but because James was known to be a Papist, many people feared that it was the beginning of a return to Catholicism.

Seven bishops including Archbishop Sancroft and Thomas Ken met in Lambeth Palace and sent petition to King asking him to withdraw it. The petition was printed and sold in the streets. The bishops were sent to the Tower and then tried for seditious libel in Westminster Hall under Judge Jeffries. Samuel Pepys was there and describes how their boat journey from the Tower to Westminster was watched by cheering crowds. Jeffries wisely acquitted them, and Ken went back to Wells where he lived in the beautiful bishop's palace where the swans swimming in the moat used to come and ring the bell when they wanted feeding. But Ken used to feed the people too, and every Sunday when he was at home he used to invite 12 poor people to come and have dinner at the Palace with him, and he served them himself. It is interesting that he had 12 women one week, and 12 men the next. Fear of Catholicism came to a head in 1688, and as King James II fled to France William and Mary were welcomed in England as King and Queen. They were the couple Ken had been chaplain to in The Hague in 1679. Nine of the bishops, including Ken, refused to swear an oath of allegiance to them because they had already sworn to defend James. They were known as the Non-Juring Bishops. Many bishops gave in after a time, but not Ken, and in 1691 he was finally dismissed from his bishopric of Bath and Wells.

Ken sold all his possessions at Wells for £700, which he gave to his old Oxford friend Thomas Thynne at Longleat, and in exchange Thynne, who became 1st Viscount Weymouth, (and whose descendents became Marquises of Bath), gave him an annuity of £80 a year, and lodgings on the top floor at Longleat where he lived for the rest of his life.

He is said to have given Thynne his books, and worked tirelessly on the library – the Green library on the top floor at Longleat – (sadly not open to the public). He also was largely responsible for founding of Warminster School.

The archivist at Longleat replied rather curtly to my enquiries, and said that Ken was given sanctuary at Longleat by Thynne who was was a very significant book collector and founded a large number of schools.

However the headmaster of Warminster School (founded in 1691) sent me a charming reply to my query saying that Ken is acknowledged as a founder of the school and thanked every year at their founders' day service. Ken presented his red velvet chair to the school and it sits in the headmaster's office to this day and is much cherished. The headmaster said that Ken was a strong influence for good on Lord Weymouth, and encouraged him in his good works, and certainly the chapel at Longleat was rebuilt at this time. The school would like to believe that the chair is the one that Charles II sat in when he visited Longleat in 1663, but about that the headmaster is less certain.

The magnificent view of Longleat from the top of the hill was named 'Heaven's Gate' by Ken because it is so beautiful.

One hopes that Ken was happy at Longleat. He was a poet, a hymn writer, and a musician, and it may be here that he wrote his two most famous hymns there which he was heard singing to his lute in morning and evening – but I think he must have missed the times when he was right in the centre of the politics of the country.

He died after some years of failing health on 19<sup>th</sup> March, 1711 (or 8<sup>th</sup> June) and two days later he was buried at the church of St. John the Baptist in Frome.

We visited the church, and were welcomed by people who were preparing a jumble sale. When I asked about Ken they were delighted, because they are very proud of him. There is a chapel dedicated to him at the South east corner with a window commemorating his Sunday dinners for the 12 poor people at Wells, and it is floored with tiles in his honour. Each year they have a pilgrimage from Frome to Longleat by way of Heaven's Gate, because this was the route taken by Ken's coffin when it was carried to the church by 12 poor men in relays. And he chose Frome church because it was the closest church in his old diocese of Bath and Wells to Longleat.

He wrote his own epitaph:

*May the here interred Thomas, late Bishop of Bath and Wells, and uncanonically Deprived for not transferring his Allegiance, have a perfect consummation of Bliss, both in body and Soul, at the Great Day, of which God keep me allwaies mindfull.*

His grave is in an odd little chapel at the east end of the church – outside – and he wanted a plain black stone. It was his friend Lord Weymouth who added the strange grill, and the iron mitre and crozier on the top.

### **St.Johns**

You will be disappointed that I have said nothing about what Ken did when he was priest in charge of St. John the Baptist, here in Winchester. That is because I have failed to find out much.

It is believed that he preached in our pulpit. Certainly the door could date from his times, so let's hope that he did. He would recognise much of the church if he came back today, but he would miss the organ and probably the pews. The wall paintings would have been covered in his day and there would have been little stained glass.

## So What was St. John's like when Ken was ministering here 1665-1685

I have tried to find some details of his activities here but have failed. I have been to the Hampshire Records Office and looked at the Parish Records which show about 15 baptisms a year during his time here. and also an average of 20 marriages a year. Between 1667 and 1670 there were 25 babies christened Thomas. But sadly there is no record ever of the officiating priest.

I have also looked at the Church Wardens Accounts which exist in the Records Office from 1596-1800 and show receipts and payments. I believe Ken was unpaid for his work in the parish, but I hoped to find some payment of expenses for him, and I could find no record of any.

The accounts are in a big book with a white leather cover, somewhat shabby. It is very exciting to turn over the pages when you think it was written by people who lived here 400 years ago. Each year the book is signed by Church wardens as a receipt for property owned by the Church and 6 others signed too. Several of those made their mark because they could not write. Most years they included 2 overseers of the poor, and 2 surveyors of the highways.

They handed the church's treasures on to the next year's church wardens:

A silver cup, silver spoons, a pewter flagon, pulpit cloth, common prayer book, great bible, napkin to bury the dead corpse.

The records are difficult to read – I was confused by how many people gave loaves, and then I realised the word was 'leases' and it was rent paid to the church (much of which was in arrears.)

Some details of income and expenditure are as follows;

**1665** income mostly from rents of 15 properties owned by the parish and Winnall quarry.

Income was £14.02.10 expenditure £11.13.11. Money was paid to a blind man, to the archbishop for a book of Articles, to work done on the church, To seamen (with a pass,) for bell rope, for bell ringers, to a woman's losses by fire, for mending the chapel, for poor of the parish, for beer when I was at ?? (who and why?)

**1667** 14/- paid to Sabine family for graves and coffins for 4 daughters.

And also mourning for several families - Perhaps this is this still the great plague.

George Emos was paid for digging 21 graves – 10/6d

1/6 to ringers on annunciation day. To seamen.

**1671 for bread and wine 1/1d**

For perambulation 5/-

King's rent £5.5.0

Pd for warming at visitation 6d

For repairing clock £1/6/0

4/6d to Bayliff when Larmand went to Jayle

To workmen 1/-, forman 1d.

**1672 income £15.9.4d**

Expenses £9.5.4 pence halfpenny.

land rent to bishop 7/-

To widow Eclot for washing church linnon (sic) 1/-

To a Turkish soldier 3d.

Poor woman with 6 ch. 6d.

Gave to the ringers on gunpower day 1/-

**1673 income** £21.16.2 possessions of church now include a surplice, and a bier for carrying the dead.

Expenses for 3 dinners, 4d. for making a shirt for the franklin

1674 income £24.19.10

3/4d for burying a child in the chansoll (sic)

Lock for the belfry door.

What these records show is that the parish was well managed and there was a certain element of philanthropy, even though there was little money to spare. They were not very generous either – 1 poor widow with 6 children was paid 6d. There were many travelling people passing through, but you only got alms if you had a travelling pass, presumably from your parish of origin.

A legend tells us that one very dilapidated young boy called Matthew, was baptised by Bishop Ken, and immediately started to recover. If only we knew a bit more. What is certain is that Ken was a very active young priest when he was here, and I hope he played the organ or the lute in the church and led the singing *'with his voice like a nightingale,* and I hope too that he found friends here *to be very facetious and entertaining* with sometimes in the evening





## Rope for 3<sup>rd</sup> bell 3/-



Our history -  
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