

St Richard of Chichester 1197-1253

St Richard was born at Wych, now Droitwich, near Worcester in about 1197. He came apparently from a well-to-do farming family, but his parents both died when Richard was young. The family farm fell into ruin, but the young Richard worked hard to restore the family fortunes. His desire, however, was to study, and eventually he went to Oxford. Here he was taught by the distinguished scholar, Edmund Rich. From Oxford, Richard went on to study at Paris and at Bologna, the greatest universities of the time. He returned to Oxford and became Chancellor of the University.

Richard's life now took a new turn. His former teacher, Edmund Rich, had become Archbishop of Canterbury, and he invited Richard to become his Chancellor - the Archbishop's assistant, adviser, secretary. Edmund was involved in disputes with both the King and the Pope, and eventually decided to go into voluntary exile in France. Richard accompanied him, and was with him when he died in 1240. Grief-stricken, Richard decided to devote the rest of his life to prayer and study in France, but the new Archbishop, Boniface of Savoy, recalled him to England to resume his duties as Chancellor of the Province of Canterbury.

In 1244, Bishop Neville of Chichester died, and the Canons of Chichester Cathedral elected a noted servant of the King named Robert Passelewe. The King, Henry III, naturally gave his assent to the appointment. The Archbishop of Canterbury, however, overruled the election, and recommended Richard instead. The Canons of Chichester elected him, but the King was highly displeased. Both the King and Richard appealed to the Pope to resolve the *impasse*. Richard visited the Pope at Lyons, who immediately consecrated him Bishop of Chichester on 5th March 1245.

During a vacancy in a Bishopric, the revenues of the episcopal estates went to the King. Now that Richard was consecrated Bishop of Chichester, the estates should have been restored to him, but the King, refusing to recognise Richard as Bishop, retained his control of all episcopal lands, and forbade Richard even to set foot on the estates of his bishopric. For two years Richard was deprived both of his income and of any access to his cathedral and diocese. There were, however, parts of Sussex which were under the jurisdiction of the Archbishop of Canterbury, and this made it possible for Richard to move about Sussex. Penniless, on foot, Richard won the hearts of the people of Sussex by the simplicity and holiness of his life. Eventually the King relented, and the estates of the bishopric were restored. Richard was able to enjoy the rights and revenues of the diocese; but notwithstanding this he maintained his simple and austere manner of life. A genial host to others, he kept to a frugal diet himself, and was a strict vegetarian. He governed the diocese wisely and well, worked hard to improve the standard of pastoral care offered by the parish clergy, encouraged the new orders of friars, and provided generously for the upkeep of the cathedral.

In 1250, King Henry III decided to give the flagging Crusade movement a new impulse, and himself took the Cross. Richard was one of those appointed by the Pope to support this new effort by his preaching. In the spring of 1253, Richard, though in failing health, set out on a preaching tour of southern England. It is difficult for us today to enter sympathetically into the mind of the Crusaders, but few in Western Christendom at that time would have doubted the obligation to establish Christian control over the Holy places of Palestine. Richard ended his tour in Dover. Here he dedicated a chapel in honour of his former patron and friend, Edmund Rich, in the cause of whose canonization Richard had been active. This was Richard's last act as Bishop. Towards midnight on 3rd April 1253, Richard died. His body

was brought back to Chichester, and buried, as he had decreed in his will, before the altar of St Edmund in the north aisle of the nave. Richard himself had dedicated this altar. The chapel, of St Edmund and St Thomas Becket, still stands, having been restored during the twentieth century.

Richard was already regarded as a saint. The people of Sussex flocked to pray at his tomb. His formal canonization followed on 22nd January 1262, and on 16th June 1276, in the presence of King Edward I and a vast concourse of people, the body was carried ('translated') to a new shrine in the Retrochoir, behind the high altar. 16th June, the Feast of the Translation of St Richard, is kept as the principal annual commemoration of St Richard in both the Diocese and the Cathedral of Chichester.

In the following centuries, Chichester was an important place of pilgrimage. Pilgrims came first to his original place of burial, the altar of St Edmund; thence to the shrine in the Retrochoir; finally to the altar of St Mary Magdalen, where his head was preserved separately in a reliquary. Richard was venerated in other places in Sussex, in Dover, in his home town of Droitwich, and in various places in France. In 1538, the pilgrimages to his shrine came to an end, when King Henry VIII ordered its destruction.

In recent years, the Shrine has been restored. An altar was dedicated in 1930, replaced with the present altar in 1984. In 1985, the 'Anglo-German Tapestry', commemorating both the life of St Richard and the friendships established between Bishop George Bell and the German churches in the twentieth century, was installed. Finally in 1992, a relic of St Richard which had been venerated at the Abbey of La Lucerne in Normandy since the Middle Ages, was interred beneath St Richard's altar.

ST RICHARD'S PRAYER

*Thanks be to thee,
my Lord Jesus Christ,
for all the benefits which
thou hast given me,
for all the pains and insults
which thou hast borne for me,
O most merciful Redeemer,
Friend and Brother,
may I know thee more clearly,
love thee more dearly,
and follow thee more nearly,
Amen*