

John Wycliffe in Ludgershall.

Ludgershall does not appear to have bred any very famous sons or daughters, just a succession of honest hardworking men and women, the type of people who have been the backbone of our society since it began. The village however does have an association with one nationally recognised figure. John Wycliffe. It is thought that Wycliffe was born in Yorkshire around the mid 1320s and came to notice when he attended Oxford University in around 1350. At Oxford it is thought that he first attended Balliol College. Balliol was founded by John Balliol of Yorkshire, a county association which may have helped his entry. By 1356 Wycliffe was connected with Merton College and then in 1360 he was Master of Balliol. In 1361 he was promoted to the living at Fillingham in Lincolnshire, the patronage of which was held at that time by Balliol College. This was known as a rich living and thus enabled Wycliffe to continue at Oxford, leaving his clerical duties in the parish to a curate. At Oxford Wycliffe studied Divinity and perhaps began to form his ideas for the transformation of the Church into something more relevant to English society as it was then. At this time all church services were held in Latin, the Bible was in Latin and this meant that most of the population were unable to understand what was being said. Wycliffe, often known as 'the Morning Star of the Reformation' was one of the first to suggest that a change from Latin to English would help better understanding of the Church and its teachings. The Pope in Rome, as one might expect did not agree. However this article is not about Wycliffe and the changes he caused throughout Christendom it is about his association with Ludgershall.

Wycliffe continued to hold the living at Fillingham until November 1368 when he took the considerably less lucrative living of Ludgershall. At Fillingham Wycliffe could expect to receive some thirty marks per year, at Ludgershall only ten. Lipscombe suggests that the living was eleven and a half marks including pannage of hogs in Bernwood Forest but ten marks is thought to have been the most reliable figure. It has been noted by historians that the living of Ludgershall was exchanged by four clerics in succession, this suggests that it was not a popular living and one from which most clerics aspired to move from as soon as they could. This may have been because the living was poor or because the congregation were difficult to engage with. It is thought however that for Wycliffe this loss of income was preferable because it meant that he was much closer to Oxford. It also meant that he could carry out some of his clerical duties personally rather than leave it to a curate. Wycliffe held the living at Ludgershall until 1374 when he moved to Lutterworth in Leicestershire. During this period of almost six years we are unable to say whether or not Wycliffe actually lived in the village on a permanent basis. I suspect that he did not, using Oxford and the colleges as his main base and staying in the village only as and when he needed to. Tradition, one historian described it as '*a worthless local tradition*' has it that he translated the Bible into English whilst sitting in a room above what is now the porch in Ludgershall Church. There are still remaining a set of spiral steps behind a door in the chancel which apparently did reach up to a room above the porch, and some indication within the porch that an upper floor existed, however these are of a later date than the of Wycliffe so that the best that might be said about the room is that it probably did exist but in an earlier form. Perhaps one should also say at this point that Wycliffe did not translate the Bible into English on his own but with the help of many others who either did the translation or the writing. The portrait of Wycliffe in the east window of the church shows the scene well, but perhaps one should view it with an acknowledgment to poetic license.

The Ludgershall that Wycliffe knew was mainly populated by serfs and villiens, poorer classes of people that may in some way have given Wycliffe some insight into the way ordinary people of the time lived. The year after his presentation to the village there was '*a great pestilence of men and large beasts.*' This could mean that the plague again visited the village as it had done at the time of the Black Death which occurred between 1348 and 1352 and as it was so to do for many years after 1369. The pestilence of the great beasts could have been a form of foot and mouth or more probably an outbreak of rinderpest. Also in this year he wrote that there was a '*falling of waters*' possibly a great storm or storms which destroyed crops and caused the price of wheat and other staples to rise causing hardship to those who could ill afford to pay high prices.

In his writings about the village Wycliffe not only gave us an insight into the economic conditions but also the social conditions of the time. The historian Workman suggests that moving to the living at Ludgershall allowed Wycliffe '*to come into contact with the coarse side of English village life.*' Wycliffe certainly wrote about what he saw in the village. In one of his writings he describes a Ludgershall peasant who was bedridden '*couching in muck and dust*'. It might sound very unpleasant to us and Wycliffe certainly found it so, but we would do well to remember that this was a period when there were none of the modern-day conveniences which we take for granted. The floor of any house or hovel would have been beaten earth, heating would have been a simple fire vented through a hole in the roof and hygiene would have been a science yet to be invented. Wycliffe in his lodgings at a college in Oxford would have been much better off, warmer and of course much better fed.

Wycliffe also describes a view of the moral conditions within the village at the time. He describes men getting drunk on borrowed money and of a prevalence of '*dalliance with women*'. We are not told whether these two acts occur, as one a consequence of the other or that they occur separately. Or indeed what he actually meant by dalliance, modern dictionaries term it 'amorous toying or idle flirtation' He did not however approve. But he did think it important enough to report upon and for that we should be grateful as it gives us an insight as to how our forebears lived and what they did. I have no doubt that others looking back on our occupation of the village in a hundred or two hundred years will wonder at the way we live. What tales of drunkenness and dalliance will they have to read about I wonder? We should remember that at the time life was hard, getting enough food to feed a family was hard, most people had to be self-sufficient growing their own food, rearing their own livestock, and making sure that they had enough to see themselves and their families through the winter months. Wycliffe would have seen their struggles and indeed may have helped some of his flock, but also from the tone of his writings may have condemned others.

Wycliffe also mentions in his writings about the village the '*frequent sale and loan of wives.*' For many of us the only reference point we have about the sale of wives is the Thomas Hardy novel, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Hardy describes the wife being taken to the market to be sold. We should remember that this is the Victorian era when wives were considered the property of their husband. This had not changed since Wycliffe's day. He does not tell us how frequent the sales were but probably common enough to be accepted without much comment. He does not actually say that Ludgershall wives were bought and sold merely intimates that it did happen. To us the procedure may seem barbaric, at the very least unfair on the women but none the less fully accepted by society at that time. At a time when very few girls over the age of fourteen were unmarried, there may well have been many cases where the couples did not live in harmony, or when economic constraints

meant that a man was not able to provide for his wife. There was no provision for divorce or annulment unless you were very rich and as we know most of the inhabitants of Ludgershall were not.

Wycliffe left the parish in 1374 for the parish of Lutterworth. He was by this time considered a great reformer, but he was not universally liked by his peers in the Church and continued to have difficulties with the Pope and his officials. There were many who did not agree with the direction in which he thought the Church and its teachings should go. It was in the end, after his death, to prove his undoing. Ludgershall however, can bask, if only slightly in his reflected glory. It is possible that what he saw in Ludgershall, what he experienced here may have helped form his thoughts. If nothing else we should be grateful that he left us a few insights into our village, even if they were for the most part not very complimentary.

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