

## HENRY DENE: PRIOR OF LLANTHONY 1461-1501

‘a man of great wit and dilligence’

Little is known about the origins and early life of Henry Dene, who it is believed was born around 1430. It has been suggested that he was a minor member of the Dene family who hailed from the St Briavells area of the Forest of Dean, however there is no evidence to support this. Equally there is little evidence of his attendance at or matriculation from either Oxford or Cambridge, although there is some evidence in the form of a letter which indicates that he had lodgings in Oxford, presumably whilst he was studying there.

The first real facts we know about Henry is that of his appointment as Prior to Llanthony Secunda in 1461 during the reign of Edward IV, presumably he was a canon at the priory before this. During his tenure as Prior, Henry was responsible for the development and restoration of the Priory.

He commissioned the main gateway, still visible today, although the coats of arms of the King, the De Bohun family and what is believed to be his own arms – that of argent with sable chevron with three birds (either Cornish Choughs or Danish Ravens) are now so



weathered they are difficult to make out. He was also responsible for rebuilding at St Swithuns Church Hempstead, an early endowment to Llanthony Secunda-where it is said there is a corbel with a mitre said to be representing Henry Dene together with a small piece of medieval stained glass thought to be a likeness of him.



Photograph of stained glass fragment in St Swithuns Chirch Hempstead

The redevelopment and adaptations to St Mary De Crypt Church in Southgate Street, in the perpendicular style also date to the time of Henry Dene. Sometimes

described as cathedral in miniature. There is a triple sedilla on the south side and a single sedile on the north side which is rare. It is said Dene used this for himself.

It may well have been in recognition of his acumen in managing Secunda's religious and secular functions, that Edward IV allowed the merger of Llanthony Secunda with Llanthony Prima for the 'consideration of 300 marks paid into the Kings hands. Prima at this time had declined substantially, it was said that divine worship and regular observance of the order were neglected, and revenues wasted. There remained only the Prior and four canons, a situation that continued until the dissolution. Thus in 1481 the two Llanthonys were reunited.

By September 1495, Henry's endeavours must have come to the notice of the King, as he was appointed Chancellor of Ireland. He was described as a man of great 'wyt and diligence' whose talents and energy helped bring about the Poyning Act, establishing the authority of the English in Ireland. At the close of 1495 it was, 'with fidelity and prudent sagacity' that Henry VII appointed him as Bishop of Bangor, and in January 1496 he became Deputy and Justiciary of Ireland.

The See of Bangor had been much neglected, Henry Dene set about restoration, he rebuilt the choir and restored and reasserted the fishing rights and payment of taxes from the Isle of Seals just off Anglesey. Henry personally got involved with these actions, he took part in a fishing trip and then claimed all the fish for himself; when the Islanders refused to pay their taxes, he went in person with an armed force to collect – the islanders soon acquiesced.

When in 1499 the see of Salisbury became vacant, the King appointed Henry to the post. At this point he was holding the position of Bishop of Bangor, Bishop of Salisbury and Prior of Llanthony (in commendam).

On the death of Lord Chancellor Morton in 1500 Henry was appointed Lord Keeper of the Great Seal and in 1501, it would appear during a visit by Henry VII to Henry Dene at Llanthony Priory he was given the position of Archbishop of Canterbury. This was constituted by Pope Alexander VI; being delivered by the Bishop of Coventry. Although it is thought, probably due to the cost Henry Dene was not fully

transmuted into the role. On becoming Archbishop he gave up his previous positions.

In 1502 Henry Dene, now aged about 72 resigned the Great Seal, devoting himself to the church. There had been no parliaments during his time as Keeper. He was responsible for the rebuilding of the manor house at Orford and repairs of Rochester bridge. More notably during his tenure as Archbishop he officiated at the marriage of Prince Arthur and Catherine of Aragon. He was responsible for the negotiation of the Perpetual Peace treaty with Scotland and for the marriage arrangements of Henry VII's daughter Margaret to James IV of Scotland.

Sadly, in February 1503 Henry Dene died. He left a very detailed will, making little reference to any family but much about how he wished his funeral to be conducted.

'The corpse was transported by the Thames to Faversham in a barge, attended by thirty-three mariners in black attire, with candles burning ; and thence conveyed by the same attendants to Canterbury in a funeral car (feretro).<sup>9</sup> Upon the coffin was placed an effigy (ad similitudinem), sumptuously vested in pontificals ; sixty gentlemen accompanied the procession on horseback ; fifty torches blazed around the corpse ; it was interred on the feast of St. Mathias the Apostle (February 24), near the resting-place of Archbishop Stafford in the Martyrdom at Canterbury Cathedral, in accordance with the directions in his will.'<sup>1</sup>

His resting place in the Martyrdom was marked by a slab of white marble inlaid with a brass memorial. This is now lost probably during the Civil War, but we do know that this was the inscription.

*: Hic sub marmore iacet corpus reverendissimi in CHRISTO patris & domini D. HENRICI DENE, quondam prioris prioratus de Lanthona, deinde Bangorensis ac successive Sarum episcopi. Postremo vero bujus metropolitice ecclesie archiepiscopi; diem suum clausit extremum apud Lambeth. 15 die mens. Feb. Ann. Domini 1502, in secundo translationis anno. cujus anime propilietur altissimus.*<sup>2</sup>

It is said that the executors of the will in some way took much of the assets, as it is recorded that he died in relative poverty; probably an accolade for an Augustinian Canon. Interestingly one of the executors was a certain Thomas Wolsey.

At the funeral of Elizabeth, wife of Henry VII at around the same time as the death of Henry Dene, the Bishop of Rochester said that England had suffered three great losses, the death of Queen Elizabeth, Prince Arthur and the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Thus the life of one of the most able men in all England, whose great wyt and diligence brought prosperity and success to Henry VII came to a close.

## SOURCES

1. Rev. John Bathurst Deane (1861) Original Documents  
The will of Henry Dene, Archbishop of Canterbury, Deceased 15 February, 1502–3, *Archaeological Journal*, 18:1, 256-267, DOI: [10.1080/00665983.1861.10851193](https://doi.org/10.1080/00665983.1861.10851193)
- 2 Edward Hasted, 'The archbishops: Simon de Sudbury to Henry Dene', in *The History and Topographical Survey of the County of Kent: Volume 12* (Canterbury, 1801), pp. 400-438. *British History Online* <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/survey-kent/vol12/pp400-438> [accessed 14 November 2018].



Compiled by Rose McDowall ( January 2019)