

# English Episcopal Acta

In 2005 the Academy published the 30th in its ambitious series of volumes containing the texts of all English episcopal acta to survive for the period between the Norman Conquest and the emergence of bishops' registers during the course of the thirteenth century. Professor Barrie Dobson FBA, current Chairman of the English Episcopal Acta editorial committee, reviews the progress of this enterprise and indicates its importance for all branches of medieval studies.

ON 22 May 1973 the late Professor Christopher Cheney wrote from the British Academy to Dr David Smith, then a comparative newcomer to the Borthwick Institute of Historical Research of the University of York, inviting him to become General Editor of a 'new project' – to publish a comprehensive collection of all surviving charters and other formal documents or *acta* issued in the names of English bishops between the Norman Conquest and the emergence of episcopal registers during the thirteenth century. Christopher Cheney, quite as scrupulous in matters of business as of textual scholarship, was careful to point out that there was no guarantee of financial support at all. Nevertheless, 'I can see no serious danger of the Academy drawing back provided that our Committee can show that the work goes forward.' Thirty years and thirty volumes later no one can doubt that the confidence of Christopher Cheney and of the Academy a generation ago has proved to be well founded. Although not yet complete, the *English Episcopal Acta* series is certain to

be consulted – and indeed venerated – for centuries rather than merely decades to come.

In retrospect the decision by Christopher Cheney and his colleagues to embark on a comprehensive edition of all these episcopal *acta* must seem a remarkably ambitious leap in the dark, not least because it is only now beginning to be clear exactly how many such *acta* (more than 5,000 indeed) survive. Admittedly the significance of the latter as one of the few absolutely major documentary sources for the study of the post-Conquest English church had long been appreciated by a handful of English medievalists, if usually only in a very general way. Thus, although Sir Frank Stenton made an eloquent plea for the uniform publication of all extant episcopal *acta* in a celebrated article of 1929, for a generation thereafter it seemed inevitable that they would continue to be published piecemeal if at all, and in slow and erratic fashion. The decision to create a unified Academy episcopal *acta* series not only foreclosed on that possibility: it demonstrates to perfection, like other Academy Research Projects of the last fifty years, the massive scholarly achievement attainable when – and only when – a national institution is prepared to lend properly long-term support to a project so vast that it could otherwise never hope to be viable at all.

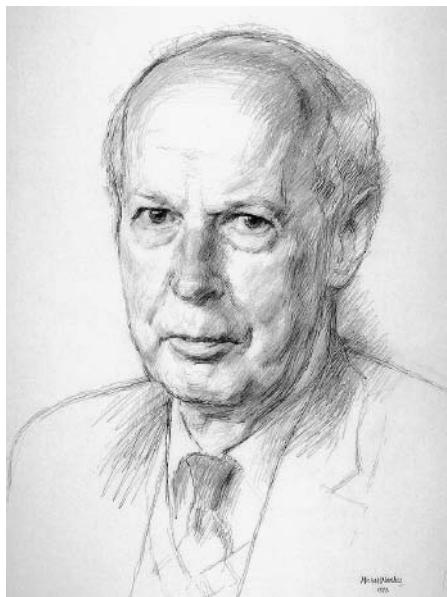
Many of the *acta* project's greatest personal debts are accordingly to the staff of the Academy, and to the many Fellows who have appreciated its value, although not at all medieval *acta* scholars themselves. Those benefactors and well-wishers, far too many to list here, range from the late Sir Geoffrey Elton, the Academy's Publications Secretary and his successors, to Professor Rees Davies, the last Chairman of the Committee of Academy Research Projects before that committee's demise in 2000. Even more



The seal of St Hugh of Avalon, bishop of Lincoln

important as the project has gathered momentum during the last decade has been the careful attention each of its thirty volumes has received from the Academy's Publications Department. Few scholars would deny that in their familiar red bindings the episcopal *acta* volumes are among the most handsome as well as 'reader friendly' of all volumes in the Academy's research series.

Although the Academy's good will has always been – as it still is – crucial to the success of the *Acta* project, it is only very intermittently that the latter has secured the funds to employ a full-time Research Assistant. Unlike most modern research programmes in the arts and humanities, the episcopal *acta* enterprise has mainly relied for material assistance on the willing and unpaid labours of the scholars involved and on the support



Professor Christopher Cheney

of their colleges and universities. In a class of its own is the contribution to all aspects of the *Acta* project made by the Borthwick Institute of Historical Research. Founded in 1953 within the fifteenth-century St Anthony's Hall in the centre of York, the Borthwick Institute became an integral part of the University of York when the latter came into existence in 1961. As the archive depository for the records of the archbishops and province of York, the Borthwick Institute was in a unique position to become the administrative base of the new *Acta* project. As early as 1971 the then Director of the Borthwick Institute, Mrs Norah Gurney, responded favourably to Professor Cheney's suggestion that the latter should serve as the effective administrative centre of the enterprise. Unfortunately Norah Gurney died too soon to see the Institute become the headquarters of this new venture; but within a few weeks of her death and the appointment of Dr David Smith as her successor as Director, the Borthwick began to provide a highly centrifugal research enterprise with a firm physical centre. Appropriately enough, it was Professor Smith himself who inaugurated the *Acta* series by publishing the volume devoted to the diocese of Lincoln (from 1067 to 1185) in 1980.

Quite as significant for the progress of the project has been its success in attracting the active support and participation of a wide circle of enthusiastic scholars who have been prepared to dedicate months and years of their research time to English episcopal *acta* for no financial reward. Such dedication is all the more remarkable given that the discovery, transcription and annotation of twelfth- and thirteenth-century charters is notoriously one of the most complex and demanding genres of textual scholarship in English – or indeed European – literary studies. However, perhaps partly for that very reason (research on episcopal charters offers their devotees an endless series of intriguing linguistic detective puzzles), the project gradually evolved into a collaborative enterprise between twenty or so very skilled – and very different – editors. They have ranged from senior members of the Academy, like Christopher Cheney himself and Frank Barlow, to younger scholars completing their first research projects. In a special category of her own is Dr Philippa Hoskin, not only



*The Borthwick Institute at St Anthony's Hall (1953–2005)*

because she has already edited as many as four *Acta* volumes herself, but also because she is now the senior medieval Archivist at the Borthwick Institute and David Smith's colleague as General Editor of the series as a whole.

Such a varied if distinguished conglomeration of scholars might seem likely to compose a somewhat discordant orchestra. That in fact so few scholarly or personal false notes have resounded during the last three decades of intensive research on the episcopal *acta* is due above all to Christopher Brooke, the project's chief conductor as well as its most persuasive strategist and energiser. Quite apart from scrutinising, like David Smith, more English episcopal acts than any scholar alive or dead, Christopher Brooke has fostered an atmosphere of harmonious communal endeavour by no means to be

taken for granted in such an ambitious collaborative research enterprise. It is a particularly appropriate recognition of his central role in the project that the Academy has recently decided to sponsor the publication of a special volume (edited by Dr Martin Brett and adorned with 100 illustrations) to be presented to him under the title of *Facsimiles of English Episcopal Acta, 1066–1300*.

As Christopher Brooke has always been at pains to point out, the main justification for a definitive edition of surviving episcopal *acta* is that no other source throws remotely as much light on the structural development of the English church in its most formative period. Without the survival of these official or quasi-official documents it would be quite impossible to place the famous rhetoric which accompanied the notorious conflicts



*Dr Philippa Hoskin*



between Archbishop Anselm and Henry I or Thomas Becket and Henry II within the context of a real and tangible *ecclesia Anglicana*. Not surprisingly, the *Acta* series has illuminated, as never before, the gradual if erratic development of episcopal power itself. One of the greater pleasures of the

series is that the lengthy introductions to each volume (themselves a major contribution to medieval scholarship) provide new insights into the administrative and other skills of those prelates who actually ruled the dioceses of medieval England. Moreover the historian of medieval episcopal

*acta* enjoys the incidental advantage that there were, surprisingly, only seventeen medieval dioceses in the English realm after the foundation of the see of Carlisle in 1131–3. The *acta* of their bishops can therefore readily be studied and published diocese by diocese. Such an approach itself

illustrates the extreme variations in the development of post-Conquest English episcopal administrative practice. Thus only one volume in the series (*EEA* 30) suffices to contain all the *acta* of the diocese of Carlisle from 1133 to 1292; but (at the opposite extreme) no less than seven volumes in the series will be needed to provide a complete collection of all the *acta* of the archbishop of Canterbury from 1070 to 1278.

Like most important research projects, the episcopal *acta* series has an exhilarating tendency to raise even more significant questions than those it answers. Certain familiar problems, like the identity of the personnel who served in episcopal households, have never been so well documented as they now are by successive *Acta* volumes. On the other hand, it can still remain extremely difficult to know how far (in Sir James Holt's formulation of the problem) 'the surviving documents represent the administrative activities from which they spring'. That said, the *Acta* project leaves no serious doubt of the increasing authority of the English bishops over their dioceses during the reigns of the Norman, Angevin and early Plantagenet monarchs. Throughout this long period the great majority of surviving episcopal charters always tended to be concerned with parish churches and monasteries. Thus of the 150 surviving *acta* from the diocese of York between 1070 and 1154, approximately half are confirmations of grants of churches and privileges made to religious communities. It can hardly fail to



An agreement between Richard of Ilchester, bishop of Winchester, and the master of Hospitallers, dated 1185

follow that such texts are critical to our understanding of the origins of those most fundamental institutions of the English medieval church, the monastic houses and the parishes. Not surprisingly, given the landed wealth needed to sustain the former, bitter conflicts for property and prestige led to the widespread habit of forgery, a problem which still bedevils the interpretation of so many charters issued by bishops during the two centuries after the Norman Conquest. Medieval forgery is more complex than it might seem; and an astonishing number of major monasteries in England (and some very minor ones) were involved in a practice which presents modern scholars with the problem of where documentary 'truth' really lies.

Genuine and forged episcopal *acta* alike can throw intense beams of light into many otherwise mysterious corners of medieval history. They provide invaluable insights into subjects as diverse as the money-lending activities of Anglo-Jewry, the concept and practice of early medieval marriage as well as the size of Norman cathedral naves and the origins of English surnames. All these topics, like the many others raised by the *Acta* series, are likely to be a matter for debate as long



Illuminated initial letter from the *Vita Galfredi*, possibly intended to represent Geoffrey Plantagenet, archbishop of York. Master and Fellows of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge

as traditional English scholarship survives. But then in the last resort the episcopal *acta* series was always bound to be a programme for the future rather than the past. In Christopher Brooke's most cogent argument for the value of the project as a whole, 'only with full texts of all comparable *acta* can their secrets be wrung out of them'. That ambition is at last almost within reach. Shortly after the first volume of *English Episcopal Acta* was published in 1980 our Committee began to develop the hope that the enterprise might be fully accomplished exactly thirty years later. It is all the greater a pleasure to report that by the end of 2006 volume 32 will be in the press; and, barring the unexpected, the 46th and last volume will complete the series in 2010. No doubt not all their secrets will ever be fully revealed; but that can hardly prevent the published *acta* of their early medieval bishops from becoming one of the few indispensable guides to the genesis of the English state and church.

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The *English Episcopal Acta* series is published by the British Academy. Details can be found on the web site via [www.britac.ac.uk/pubs/](http://www.britac.ac.uk/pubs/)