

Why did Bishop Maidstone embark on this programme of dedications?

Bishop Walter Maidstone was concerned to regularise the many, noticeably smaller, churches in his diocese of Worcester that had never been dedicated. This must have meant that they had been built or extended without this ceremony ever having taken place meaning, in turn, that holding a mass in such a church was strictly illegal under church law.

Presumably Walter Maidstone must have had some kind of procedure to ascertain which these churches were, perhaps consulting diocesan records, maybe challenging parishes, possibly even responding to requests from parishes. This was not a problem just in the diocese of Worcester as we know that all bishops in the country had been publicly challenged on the issue in 1237, long before Maidstone was born.

A legate of the Pope called Cardinal Otto visited the country in that year, summoned all the bishops to a council at St Paul's in London and addressed them on what he considered to be the many failings of the church.



Illustration from Matthew Paris' *Chronica Majora* showing a hectoring Otto addressing thoroughly resentful English bishops summoned to St Paul's in London.

Cardinal Otto listed as the first weakness in the country the many churches, cathedrals, abbeys and convents that had never been dedicated, and required the bishops to rectify the matter immediately and to make sure in future that any new buildings were always dedicated within two years.

From Cardinal Otto's Legatine Council in St Paul's London in 1237
"Now because we have ourselves seen and heard by many that so wholesome a mystery is despised, at least neglected by some, (for we have found many churches and some cathedrals not consecrated with holy oil, though built of old,) we therefore being desirous to obviate so great a neglect, do ordain and give in charge that all cathedral, conventual, and parochial churches, which are ready built, and their walls perfected be consecrated by the diocesan bishops to whom they belong, or others authorised by them within two years : and let it be done within a like time in all churches hereafter to be built: and lest so wholesome a statute grow into contempt, if such like places be not dedicated within two years from the time of their being finished, we decree them to remain interdicted from the solemnization of masses, until they be consecrated, unless they be excused for some reasonable cause. Further by the present statute we strictly forbid abbots and rectors of churches to pull down ancient consecrated churches, without the consent and licence of the bishop of the diocese, under pretence of raising a more ample and fair fabric. Let the diocesan consider whether it be more expedient to grant or deny a licence: if he grant it, let him take care that the work be finished as soon as may be: which we ordain also in relation to any which are already begun. We think not fit to ordain any thing concerning little chapels, leaving the time and manner of their consecrations to the canonical definitions."

There is a record of the then Bishop of Worcester, Walter Cantilupe, putting precisely this issue to his diocese soon after in 1240 (3rd out of 102 statutes) but this demand was obviously not met throughout the country as it was repeated at another council of all the bishops in London in 1268 and again by the Bishop of Exeter to his diocese in 1287.

Another bishop who engaged in a programme of church dedications similar to that of Walter Maidstone was Bishop David de Bernham, Bishop of St Andrews 1239-53. He recorded in the front cover of his pontifical (the book used by the bishop at dedication ceremonies) that at the beginning of his episcopacy he dedicated no less than 89 churches or chapels in two years. So we can see that in dedicating 43 churches and chapels in 1315, Maidstone was rectifying what had been badly neglected, not only in his diocese, but throughout the country, ensuring that the Papal edict was carried out requiring all places of worship to be properly dedicated.

Why did Maidstone 'dedicate a church' at one place and 'consecrate an altar' at another?

Part of the elaborate Dedication Liturgy according to the Sarum Rite was the consecration of the main altar, so any church dedicated by Maidstone would automatically have its '*magnam altarem*' consecrated as part of the ceremony.

However there appear to be quite a number of churches where only the altar was consecrated. This was a much shorter liturgy made obvious by the fact that Maidstone was able to perform a full dedication liturgy on the same day as an altar consecration. The consecration of an altar indicated that the church itself was dedicated but the altar not. This must normally mean that a new altar had been installed as part of a reordering of the church and it needed consecrating. Or it is just possible that by some means the altar had been desecrated.

In medieval times a whole church had to be 'suspended' if blood was spilt in it, before the bishop 'reconciled' it. This might also have happened to an altar that had been the subject of misuse; it would need to be 'rehalloved' by consecration.

What is the difference between a church and a chapel?

Until the Reformation, a chapel either denoted a place of worship that was at a secondary location within a parish that was not the main responsibility of the local parish priest, or alternatively, one that belonged almost privately to a person or institution.

A given parish would always have a designated parish church but could also have a number of chapels located in different hamlets or areas of the parish. So the '*capellam*' dedications recorded in Bishop Maidstone's register could have been of either kind but were probably mostly of the first: not the main places of worship within a parish but still the responsibility of the parish priest.

Sometimes these chapels did not have the sacraments celebrated there regularly and, for example, it was quite common until the 19th century for baptisms to be reserved to the parish church not the chapel in the parish. So baptism registers often only existed for the parish church and not separate chapels within the parish.

Of course, after the Reformation the word chapel became associated with the places of worship constructed for Nonconformist worship, though this distinction between church and chapel has declined in recent years as Nonconformists have tended to prefer the word 'church' which has wider community as well as Biblical roots.