

John Wycliffe at 700 (Reflections from Oxford)

1. Introduction - the Westgate centre

Where better to reflect on the life and impact of John Wycliffe, born 700¹ years ago, than from Oxford, his home for many key moments in his life? I am writing in the Westgate Centre, one of Oxford's newest shopping centres. The average 21st century shopper here is likely to know more about John Lewis than John Wycliffe. But could John Wycliffe have had a greater impact on their life and thinking?

Few people in the Westgate Centre realise that this corner of Oxford was the site of two friaries for 300 years prior to the Reformation: the Dominican and Franciscan Friaries or, to use shorthand, the Blackfriars and the Greyfriars. These were sites dedicated to prayer, learning and mission from 1244 to 1538. The lure of mammon in the shopping centre retreats slightly with this realisation!

What are the chances people will still be shopping at the Westgate Centre in 300 years from now, I wonder?



Pavement tiles from Franciscan Friary 1244 - 1538 found beneath the Westgate Centre. Displayed above lift opposite JD Sports.

2. The problem with the Friars

Wycliffe had very little time for the Friars. In his lifetime it was not just the Greyfriars and Blackfriars who were significant in Oxford; there were also Carmelites to the north of Beaumont Street, and Augustinians, who had priories both where Wadham College and Christ Church now stand.

Wycliffe was by no means unique in his low opinion of them. His contemporary Geoffrey Chaucer² taps into the popular critique of the four orders of Friar in his famous "Canterbury Tales"...

*"There was a Friar, a wanton one and merry
A Limiter³, a very festive fellow,
In all Four Orders⁴ there was none so mellow,
So glib with gallant phrase and well-turned
speech...
He had a special licence from the Pope.*

*"Sweetly he heard his penitents at shrift
With pleasant absolution, for a gift.
He was an easy man in penance-giving
Where he could hope to make a decent living...
He was the finest beggar of his batch,
And, for his begging-district, paid a rent;
His brethren did no poaching where he went..."*

Competing for a bigger share of the market did not begin with 20th century consumerism. In return for gifts, Friars offered absolution from sins. At least for some of them, the temptation of the most lucrative patch in the confessions "market" in Wycliffe's time was too much and this brought the Friars into disrepute.

¹ The generally accepted date for Wycliffe's birth is 1324.

² Arguably the Father of English poetry and certainly the first occupant of Westminster Abbey's Poets' Corner

³ Limiter - a begging friar who was granted a district to beg in, to limit his activities

⁴ The four Orders of mendicant Friars, the Dominicans, the Franciscans, the Carmelites and the Austin (Augustinian) Friars

3. Where in history is Wycliffe?

For me, the 14th century is something of a blur, having given up history early at school. I know about the Norman Conquest and the most famous date in English history, 1066. I know about the Tudors, Henry VIII and his six wives (or is it the other way round?), the Reformation and the Spanish Armada which was the 1500s. But what lies in-between?

I suppose there are the Crusades somewhere and Richard the Lionheart, the feudal system and ducking-stool for witches and Thomas a Becket is murdered by four French knights. What about the War of the Roses? Where does John Wycliffe fit in?

Here are some dates and facts to help place Wycliffe in context.

Date	Person/event
1215	Magna Carta and King John
1324 - 1384	Dates of John Wycliffe
1342	Birth of Geoffrey Chaucer ⁵ , died 1400, author of Canterbury Tales ⁶ . He enjoyed the same protector as Wycliffe in John of Gaunt.
1348	The Black Death , in which one third to one half of England's population died
1350	Wycliffe arrives in Oxford
1355	63 students are killed in the St Scholastica's Day riots which break out at the Swindlestock Tavern on Carfax.
1356	Battle of Poitiers, won by the English, as part of the 100 Years' War between England and France. Arguably the war gave birth to a national identity for members of both countries, who previously identified more with their local Lord.
1378	The Papal Schism . Two rival popes in Avignon and Rome.
1379	New College, Oxford founded (probably only still 'New' for those who consider Wycliffe recent!) by the Bishop of Winchester, Wykeham, to train secular replacements for the many clerical administrators who had died from the Black Death and without whom the country could not function.
1381	Peasants' Revolt . ⁷ Following the Black Death, conditions for peasants started improving following the economic principles of supply and demand.
1409	Two Popes increased to three!
1415	Council of Constance . More on this later.
1420	Work begins on Oxford's Divinity School

⁵ Chaucer's son Thomas was a local grandee in Ewelme, Oxfordshire, and Thomas' daughter Alice has an elaborate tomb in the parish church. The church also featured in the musical film of Les Mis.

⁶ For an even earthier condemnation of Friars, it is hard not to smile at this excerpt from the Summoner's Tale:

*At last this friar spoke:
 "Sir, are the friars in such a state of grace,"
 He said, "none ever come into this place?"
 "Why yes," the angel answered, "many a million" ...
 "Hold up thy tail, thou Satan, "Then said he,
 "Shew forth thine arse and let the friar see
 The nest ordained for friars in this place!"
 Ere the tail rose a furlong into space*

*From underneath it there began to drive,
 Much as if bees were swarming from a hive,
 Some 20,000 friars in a rout
 And swarmed all over Hell and round about
 And then came back as fast as they could run
 And crept into his arse again, each one.
 He clapped his tail on them and then lay still...*

⁷ One leader, John Ball, famously asked "When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the Gentleman?" This was not a precursor to the LGBTQ movement, since 'Gentleman' was not a reference to gender but to social class. In other words, this is an early call for socialism and equality.

4. Significant places in John Wycliffe's story⁸

Wycliffe	Place in Yorkshire where John Wycliffe was most likely born. Sign-posted from the beautiful A66 road between Scotch Corner and Carlisle
Oxford	University where Wycliffe came to the King's attention, but from where he was expelled in 1381
Lutterworth	Parish where Wycliffe ended his days as a priest
Avignon, France	Where the French Pope resided
Constance, Germany	Location of the Papal Council which condemned Wycliffe as a heretic and ordered his body be exhumed, burnt and his ashes scattered into the River Swift. It also ordered the burning at the stake of Jan Hus in violation of a promise of safe conduct for the Reformer.

In Oxford, Wycliffe was Master of Balliol College from 1360-1361. He also spent periods at Merton College and Queen's College.



14th century building on the corner of Cornmarket and Ship Street

He would have worshipped in St Mary the Virgin, the University Church and known the Congregation House next door. One wonders if Wycliffe might have been an inspiration in the hearts of the Protestant Reformers Latimer, Ridley and Cranmer 200 years later when they stood trial in the same church.

It was at the location of what is now the King's Arms that he received the news that Oxford condemned his teaching on transubstantiation.

Some of the other buildings Wycliffe would have known are the tower of St Michael's, the Castle Mound and buildings similar to the half timbered one on the corner of Ship Street and Cornmarket.

This was built in 1386 by one John Gibbe, vintner and mayor of Oxford. It is the only surviving building of more than two storeys from the 14th century.

5. France

Without understanding the relationship between Church and State, and England and France and the Papacy in particular, it is hard to make sense of Wycliffe's rise and fall.

Throughout Wycliffe's lifetime, England and France were at war.

The king of France at the time deliberately engineered the movement of the Papacy from Rome to Avignon shortly before Wycliffe's birth, as a means of control.



The famous 'Pont d'Avignon', looking down from the Palais des Papes over the Rhone.

⁸ Places in or near Oxford associated with Wycliffe or which have changed little since his time are the small medieval ruins inside Balliol College, St Mary's church, Ludgershall where Wycliffe was incumbent from 1368 to 1374, Godstow Abbey ruins and Binsey Church, St Ebbes doorway and Iffley Church.

- In short, therefore, attacks by Wycliffe on the French would have been popular with **both the English King and the people**.
- Attacks by Wycliffe on the Friars, the Papacy, corruption in the church and against paying taxes to the French Pope would also have been hugely popular with **both the English King and the people**
- The translation of the Bible was welcome to the **English people but not to the English King**.
- Attacks by Wycliffe on transubstantiation or the Roman Catholic faith **were supported by hardly anyone**.⁹

It was thus less the case that England wanted to challenge the *Christian faith as they had received it*, than that they wanted to *challenge the way it was practised*: corruption, materialism etc. For Wycliffe¹⁰ and later Reformers however, the two were linked.¹¹

6. Wycliffe's big ideas

Here are a few of them.¹²

The Church is not truly the Church if it does not follow Jesus and resemble the early church. Similarly, the Pope is not following Christ but is the antichrist if he does not imitate the holy and humble life of Peter, allegedly the first Pope.

Money and the Church. The Church should not own or accumulate land - other than to generate income for doing the work of Christ's church, which was the work of helping the poor¹³, prayer etc.

Giving to the church or the Pope was to be done voluntarily and cheerfully. The Pope does not have the right to force the English King, on pain of excommunication etc, to demand and enforce payment of what are supposed to be gifts. This was of course very popular with the English King who suspected (probably correctly) that these funds to the Pope were in turn financing the French war effort against the English.

Transubstantiation. As a matter of philosophy, the doctrine of the bread and wine physically changing to the body and blood of Jesus cannot make sense. Wycliffe used the analogy of Scripture itself. To say that a verse of the Bible is 'God's word' does not stop it being paper and ink. Similarly, believing in the actual presence of Christ in the bread and wine does not stop it being bread and wine.

⁹ "When Wycliffe condemned the medieval theology of the eucharist as unbiblical, he was shaking the very foundations of the nation's religious life." Atherstone, p.29

¹⁰ "In the last resort what is distinctive of Wyclif's peculiar contribution at the end of the 14th century is that he disputed not the malpractice but the theory of such offices [i.e. prelates, indulgences, images, pilgrimages, monastic orders] because they are not to be traced to scripture - this inherently lays them open to question, and their blatant contemporary corruption merely exaggerates and reveals their misconception." Kenny. The Western Schism for Wycliffe was "a blessing sent by God to reveal the more clearly to men the evil inherent in the institution of the papacy." (i.e. not just in the personal morality of the incumbent.) Fountain

¹¹ When there is a problem in a church, often people agree, but it is harder always to agree on the cause. I had personal experience of this in the meltdown of the International Churches of Christ in the UK in 2003. All agreed reform was needed. But few saw that it was the paradigm of reading Scripture that was the problem. Most would agree there was legalism and an unhealthy leadership style. What they did not want to give up was the pleasant sense of 'the remnant', truly sold-out disciples, the modern-day movement of God etc. Wycliffe was the kind of person who having perceived the root problem would not rest until it was cured.

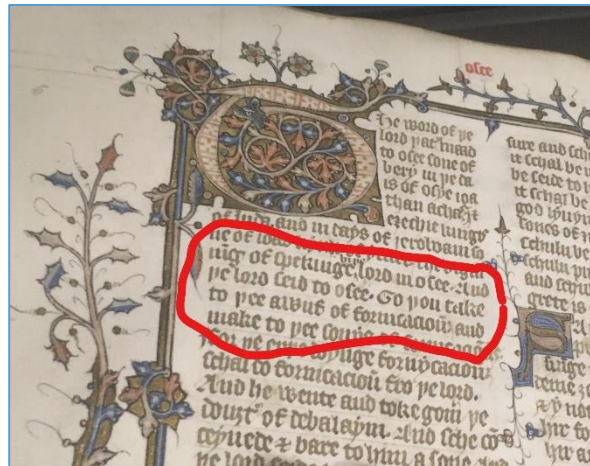
¹² Excluding his Philosophical works

¹³ Sir Anthony Kenny points out slightly tongue-in-cheek that there have only been two communist Masters of Balliol: John Wycliffe and Kenny's immediate predecessor Christopher Hill.

Authority. Wycliffe’s highest authority was Scripture. For someone accustomed to wrestling with and challenging ideas, it is notable that he did not regard Scripture as fair game for his intellect. It was to be obeyed, believed and followed. Church belief and practice were to be judged by its standards, like holding up a mirror. This clash in authority is crucial to understanding the historic gulf between Catholics and Protestants. Thankfully the gulf has become much reduced in certain places and contexts in recent years e.g. the popularity of ‘Alpha for Catholics’.¹⁴

7. His legacy.

The Wycliffe Bible in English. It is a thrill to stand next to a Wycliffe Bible in the British Library¹⁵ in London and be able to make out, in strong handwriting, familiar words in the English language on whatever page the librarians have chosen to leave the bible in its glass cabinet. Reading the whole Bible in English was not possible prior to Wycliffe¹⁶. He believed ordinary people should have access to the Bible in their own language. While he and his followers translated the Bible from Latin, Tyndale would do the same later but from Greek, the original language.



These are the opening lines of the book of Hosea (or 'Osee') from an illuminated Wycliffe Bible in the British Library, made in c. 1390. The highlighted words say “And the Lord said to Osee: Go you take to you a wife of fornication ...”



Wycliffe’s followers were known as Lollards. Contrary to what one spoof asserts, their name did not come from the fact they walked around with their tongues hanging out ... !

Lollards. Not content with teaching and writing in the University, translating the Bible and publicly taking on Catholic doctrine, he trained followers who became known as Lollards.¹⁷ The word probably comes from the Dutch word for mumbling. Arguably they are best identified as the predecessors of the Puritans who emerged two centuries later.

Wycliffe Bible Translators.¹⁸ There is no doubt that Wycliffe would be proud of their commitment to translate the Bible into every language, although upset that it has taken so long.

¹⁴ www.alpha.org - see Catholic Context tab

¹⁵ John Ritblat gallery aka Treasures of the British Library. For more details of opening times etc, see www.bl.uk/events/treasures-of-the-british-library. You can also book a tour of this and other special biblical manuscripts e.g. Codex Sinaiticus at www.zenasheritagetours.org

¹⁶ There are some exceptions e.g. Alfred’s translation of the Psalms and the interlinear insertions in the Lindisfarne Gospels. For more detail, see the Zenas Ashmolean and British Library tours

¹⁷ The ‘spoofer’ is by two schoolmasters from Charterhouse School about the history that pupils actually ‘remember’. Sellers & Yeatman, *1066 and all that*, London 1930

¹⁸ www.wycliffe.org.uk

“Democratisation” of the Church. It is hard for us to understand the complete hold that the church and its priests had over everyone’s life in England in the 14th century, rich and poor, from the cradle to the grave. The church mediated Scripture. Wycliffe wanted the ordinary person to know God and be able to read and hear Scripture for themselves. This was dangerous for those who profited from the status quo. History would say that both were right. Wycliffe’s ideas did ultimately result in a proliferation of sects and churches and the tendency to split among believers, always allegedly on a matter of ‘biblical principle’ but, one suspects, without always a full and mature understanding of Scripture. But equally, the idea of a monolithic church with a monopoly on translation and interpretation sounds horribly like something out of the Orwellian book “1984” in its potential for abuse. The system will always protect, preserve and enrich itself. To this extent, thank God for Wycliffe breaking this stranglehold.

Memorable acronyms e.g. the word CARDINAL, according to Wycliffe, stood for Captain of the Apostates of the Realm of the Devil, Impudent and Nefarious Ally of Lucifer. (I suspect twitter accounts have been closed down for less offensive posts than this.)

The English and European Reformations. Wycliffe influenced Jan Hus, Rector of Prague University¹⁹ and both men influenced Martin Luther. For this reason, Wycliffe is known as the Morning Star of the Reformation. He was just a century and half too soon.

Wycliffe Hall, Oxford.²⁰ This Oxford College offers more conservative Bible-based training than some other theological institutions. To this extent it deserves to carry Wycliffe’s name. But with that name come justifiable expectations of his boldness and engagement which are of course not so much in vogue.



Jan Hus, Rector of Prague University, martyred 1415 after Council of Constance

Some mention should be made of Wycliffe’s character, scarce as the information is. Sir Anthony Kenny in the ODNB identifies, alongside “his ready and outspoken criticism of others..., a tendency towards arrogance and anger.” Nevertheless his opponents “acknowledged his learning and the uprightness of his life.” Indeed, it is clear that he “outshone all his contemporaries in the university as a lecturer.”²¹

Besides the ‘Morning Star of the Reformation’, he has been called the ‘flower of Oxford’ and ‘the evangelical Doctor’.

8. Where would we be without Wycliffe?

Would the Reformation have happened anyway in England, given time, out of the Lollards, without the added impetus from Jan Hus and Martin Luther? Indeed, without Wycliffe, would Europe have had Hus and Luther? Had there been no English Reformation, then presumably there would have

¹⁹ A particular link to the Hussites was Peter Payne, principal of St Edmund Hall, who was a keen supporter of Wycliffe and fled to Bohemia with Wycliffe’s writings after his expulsion.

²⁰ www.wycliffe.ox.ac.uk

²¹ ODNB p. 628

been no dissolution of the monasteries. Oxford - including the area now covered by the Westgate Centre - would have looked very different.

But it is futile to conjecture. We did have Wycliffe and he clearly played a part in how our country evolved. Should time be spent trying to apportion credit between him, Tyndale, Luther and others? Hardly. They were men united in believing that as the Bible testifies, "there is only one mediator²² between God and men - the man Christ Jesus." The mediator is neither the Pope nor a priest, but Christ, whose word reveals that in his love, he gave his life "to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good."²³



Balliol College, Broad Street, Oxford as it looks today

9. Conclusion: Wycliffe's Oxford - good or bad?

Walking tours of Oxford's city centre inevitably put Oxford centre-stage. The colleges and alumni are the subject of multiple superlatives. However, in terms of Christian history, Oxford is *merely* the stage. A lot of movements and ideas have been nurtured here, but Oxford as an institution has resisted almost all of them where Christianity is concerned. It has not championed them. CS Lewis was passed over for Professorship. John Wesley shook the dust off his feet in 1744. John Wycliffe was ejected, not supported, in 1381. If anything, therefore, Oxford may be seen as the opposer of progress, although in reality, as an incubator of ideas, it is neutral - merely a stage.²⁴

However the 700th anniversary of Wycliffe's birth is marked in Oxford, certainly for anyone who appreciates being able to read the Bible in his or her own language, 2024 must be a year to thank God for John Wycliffe.

Sources

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Melvyn Bragg, *Wyclif & the Lollards*, *In Our Time* podcast broadcast on Radio 4 on 16 June 2011 and available at www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b011vh4k

Sir Anthony Kenny, *John Wyclif* in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* Vol.60, Oxford 2004

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September 2023

²² 1 Timothy 2:5

²³ Titus 2:14

²⁴ After all, our fight is not against flesh and blood. Do I believe that all tech companies are irredeemably evil, or in the infallibility of John Wycliffe, Thomas Cranmer, John Wesley, John Owen or CS Lewis? No. That does not mean we cannot learn and be inspired by their lives