

An Archbishop of Canterbury Defies a King of England:
William Warham's 1532 Response to Henry VIII
by J. J. Scarisbrick

(For full published study, see *Moreana* 58:2 (Dec. 2021): 206-39.
This excerpt is from pp. 210-11.)

...Yet Warham had agreed to it; only two other bishops had done so unequivocally.

What had happened? How to explain this apparently sudden collapse?

Did he believe that the protest he had made nearly three months earlier somehow annulled this action?

That is a possibility.

Did the canon lawyer in him enable him to distinguish between personal conviction and public action?

In other words, in delivering that Submission to the king, did he think he was simply acting *ex officio* – as chairman of Convocation – and was therefore not party to what that document contained?

That, too, is probable. Consider what actually occurred.

The upper house of the Southern Convocation consisted of the archbishop of Canterbury and seventeen diocesan bishops. Three of the latter were foreign absentees (one of those being that Thomas Campeggio, bishop of Salisbury, mentioned above). Of the remaining fourteen, no less than eight, including John Fisher (who was seriously ill at the time), were absent when the fateful vote was taken on that 15 May: that is, over half the episcopate. How far this was deliberate we will never know. But we do know that, of those six bishops who were present with Archbishop Warham, three registered formal and serious reservations,¹ and one – the bishop of Bath and Wells – refused outright. Only two bishops, plus apparently the archbishop himself, gave unequivocal assent.

This was indeed a “rump” Convocation. What Warham presented to the king was an almost worthless “submission.” It was more like refusal, defiance. That, surely, is why Warham was able to deliver it – and why, two years later, it was (had to be?) confirmed by an act of Parliament, something which had never happened before to any proceedings in Convocation.

No less, surely, Henry would have seen that he had been cheated – and would have sought revenge. But how? He soon found a way.

Within a few weeks Warham was himself “in a *praemunire*,” the charge being that, in breach of the nearly 400-year-old Constitutions of Clarendon, he had consecrated one Henry Standish bishop of St Asaph (a diocese in north-east Wales) before the latter had done homage, sworn fealty to the king, and “sued out” his temporalities: this in 1518, fourteen years past.

The charge was patently malicious.

Warham would have been tried in the House of Lords. Happily for us, the speech he had prepared to deliver there in his defense has survived.

We do not know its exact date. But in this speech Warham recalls that those Constitutions of Clarendon appeared “four hundred save thirty-one years past,” that is, 369 years ago. We today date them from January 1164. But for Warham, since a year ran from 25 March, the feast of the Annunciation, their date was 1163. 1163 plus 369 is 1532. Thus this speech must have been drafted some time after 25 March 1532.

The probable sequence of events is as follows.

Though Warham had been challenging the king for months, no way of silencing him had been found. But following that display of defiance on 15 May, search began in earnest. That may have taken a while. The best that could be found was something that had happened fourteen years before. So, the *praemunire* charge was laid in early Summer 1532: whereupon Warham prepared his defense.

The trial in the House of Lords would presumably have begun in September. It would have been clear, or made clear – at least to the “temporal” lords (the lay members of the Upper House of Parliament) – how they were to vote.

But Warham died a natural death on 23 August. Henry was thereby delivered of a “turbulent priest” – but denied revenge.

¹ In the brief, twenty-line official report of the 15 May “submission,” eleven lines register the bishops' qualifications, the strongest being Bishop of London John Stokesley's: “so that the said schedule be not against the divine law, nor contrary to the General Counsels.” See Appendix 2 for this report.