

ARCHBISHOP JOHN STRATFORD, POLITICAL REVOLUTIONARY AND  
CHAMPION OF THE LIBERTIES OF THE ENGLISH CHURCH,  
CA. 1275/80-1348

by

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John Stratford, born ca. 1275 in the Warwickshire town of that name, is arguably the most important Englishman in the ecclesiastical and political life of the fourteenth century. Prominent in the political revolution which overthrew Edward II, he was to act as diplomatic envoy, "opposition leader," and finally – once Edward III was freed from the leading strings of Queen Isabella and her lover Mortimer – as chancellor of England. In the ecclesiastical sphere, thanks to papal cooperation, he acquired the wealthiest English bishopric, Winchester, from which he progressed in 1333 to the archbishopric of Canterbury, a position he combined for some years with the chancellorship. He was also instrumental in founding an ecclesiastical dynasty, for his brother Robert became bishop of Chichester (also royal chancellor), and his nephew Ralph bishop of London.

The middle phrase of Stratford's career, which spans the initial stage of the Hundred Year's War, includes a remarkable if bizarre two years on the continent as diplomatic agent and spy, and also a period of directing royal government at home. It closes with the crisis of 1341, a titanic struggle between archbishop and king. The outcome was a partial victory for Stratford and his rehabilitation as Edward III's principal councillor. Despite such preoccupation with state affairs, Stratford produced the most extensive provincial constitutions of the later middle ages, devised detailed ordinances for the Court of Canterbury, in which he had earlier served, founded the college of St. Thomas the Martyr in his native town, preached some memorable sermons, and had a notable impact as fearless defender of the liberties of the *Ecclesia Anglicana*.

The present study is much more than a biography of Stratford. With the aid of a wide range of manuscript and printed sources, backed by a comprehensive array of secondary studies, the author charts the course of a complex and controversial character through the volatile and faction-ridden later years of Edward II and the first two decades or so of the reign of his son. Stratford's death in 1348 can be fairly said to mark the end of an era in English history.