

Wakefield Historical Society

“It began in Wakefield : 3 Wakefield Men and the Oxford Connection” by David Leyshon

Wednesday 11th February 2026 at 7pm.

The Society was treated to a most interesting overview of three Wakefield men whose lives had a wide-ranging impact in Oxford and beyond.

This was highlighted by slides showing two statues of John Radcliffe, one of the three men spoken about this evening. The first at University College, the second at the Radcliffe Library – Radcliffe’s wealth had provided the money to build the library.

But David started the story in Crofton, specifically at the parish church, where the graveyard dates back to the Middle Ages. In the church is the coat of arms of Richard Fleming who lived between the years of 1385 and 1431. Fleming like Radcliffe also attended University College at Oxford and by 1407 he was appointed a Junior Proctor and was one of twelve men commissioned to examine Wycliffite teaching.

Made Bishop of Lincoln in 1419, at that time the largest diocese in the Church in England, together with a Thomas Rotherham, Fleming founded Lincoln College in Oxford, specifically to counter Wycliffe and the Lollards. The Lollards saw the Bible as the sole source of authority, and that it should be read in the vernacular, so that everyone has a personal relationship with Christ – “Not the Church speaking through the Pope, but the voice of God speaking through His word is the only true authority.”

The 1400 Suppression of Heresy Act was directed against seditious heretics combating Lollard preaching and literature. Followers of Wycliffe suffered execution by being burnt at the stake and under Fleming’s supervision, Wycliffe’s body itself was exhumed, burnt and then thrown into a river.

However, alongside this, David felt that Fleming displayed some disingenuousness towards Lollardy and on other occasions, he took a more balanced view, emphasising the need for reform to underpin the orthodox church teaching.

On the wall of the Black Rock pub in Wakefield there is a blue plaque which celebrates the life of John Potter who lived between 1674 and 1747. Potter was to rise through the Church ranks, being Bishop of Oxford and then onto becoming the Archbishop of Canterbury from 1734 until his death. This despite the opposition of his father, a non-conformist linen draper.

Like the two other men in this story, Potter attended University College and a feature of his ministry following his ordination, was the fact that he remained on good terms with the Wesleys, after John Wesley’s conversion in 1738. The newly founded church grew to claim to

be the largest Protestant denomination. David mentioned the connection between John Wesley, born a few miles outside the county borders at Epworth, and Wakefield – he visited on at least sixteen occasions between 1744 and 1786, with his open-air preaching and his brother Charles' prolific hymn writing.

Dr John Radcliffe (1650 to 1714) became a scholar at University College, fellow of Lincoln College and MP for Buckingham. An excellent diagnostician who despite his blunt manner, became the personal physician to William and Mary and later to Queen Anne. In some ways he was ahead of his time – for instance prescribing fresh air rather than blood-letting as a treatment for smallpox.

Radcliffe acquired great wealth, possible because of his royal connections, and in 1707, his wealth was estimated to be worth £80K, a considerable fortune in the 18th century. Radcliffe's generosity with his wealth on his death ensured a legacy which exists till the present day - £40,000 was left to found the Radcliffe Library, legacies also founded the John Radcliffe Hospital, the lunatic asylum, the Observatory and the Science library.

The speaker received a warm vote of thanks for his fascinating and thorough research into the impact these three men had on Oxford and the Church.

Steve Hargrave

15 February 2026