



# John Wycliffe

## Morning Star of the Reformation

1324 – 1384

John Wycliffe trained “poor preachers” who lived a simple life and travelled around the countryside teaching the Word of God to the common folk of England in their own tongue.

John Wycliffe was responsible for the very first translation of the entire Bible into the English language. He is called “the father of English prose” because the clarity and the popularity of his writings and his sermons in the Middle English dialect did much to shape our language today.



One of Shakespeare’s greatest comic characters, Sir John Falstaff, was based on an English knight, who was a follower of Wycliffe and who died a martyr’s death.

One Pope issued five bulls against John Wycliffe for heresy, the Catholic Church in England tried him three times, and two Popes summoned him to Rome, but Wycliffe was never imprisoned nor ever went to Rome.

Although his English followers, called Lollards or Wycliffites, were

persecuted and practically disappeared from England, John Wycliffe’s influence on the Bohemians influenced the great protestant reformation of the early 16<sup>th</sup> Century.



Scene from one of the trials of John Wycliffe

In the 14<sup>th</sup> Century world, Oxford was Europe’s most outstanding university and John Wycliffe was its leading theologian and philosopher.

John Wycliffe's patron and protector, John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, was also the patron of Geoffrey Chaucer and both the preacher and poet worked in the Duke's service at one time in their lives.

The writings of John Hus, the Bohemian reformer, which got him condemned and burned at the stake, depended heavily on translations and adaptations of tracts, treatises, and sermons by John Wycliffe.

The Wycliffe translation of the Bible was made from a Latin-language, hand-written manuscript of a translation a thousand years old and before any verse numbers had been assigned.

With all of his questioning of the doctrines of the church and his criticism of the corruption of the clergy, John Wycliffe was never excommunicated, nor did he ever leave the church, but, in fact, he suffered his fatal stroke while at Mass.



Wycliffe's chair in St. Mary's



Even though John Wycliffe died peacefully at home in bed on New Year's Eve, the Church exhumed his body 44 years later, burned his bones, and scattered the ashes in a nearby river.

At the Diet of Worms in 1521, Martin Luther was accused of renewing the errors of Wycliffe and Hus by making the Scriptures his final authority.

### What to see

1. **The chair** which carried John Wycliffe out of the church when he had his stroke. (This is by the main communion table.)
2. **The Wycliffe door** through which he was taken. It can be seen best from outside the church.
3. **The Wycliffe Table** made of the pulpit sounding board upon which one can view 19<sup>th</sup> century copies of the Wycliffe Bible.

4. **Fragments of Wycliffe's cape.** (Please ask if this is not on display).

5. **Wycliffe's font** in the corner by the tapestry

6. **The Wycliffe monument.**

The monument shows Wycliffe preaching to villagers with his back to two other figures, who may be intended to represent Mendicant Friars in objection to his ministry.



The inscription reads:

*Sacred to the memory of John Wiclif, earliest champion of ecclesiastical reformation in England. He was born in Yorkshire in the year 1324. In the year 1375 he was presented to the Rectory of Lutterworth, where he died on the 31<sup>st</sup> December 1384. At Oxford he acquired not only the renown of a consummate schoolman, but the far more glorious title of the Evangelic Doctor. His whole life was one impetuous struggle against the corruptions and encroachments of the Papal Court and the impostures of its devoted auxiliaries, the Mendicant fraternities. His labours in the cause of scriptural truth were crowned by one immortal achievement, his translation of the Bible into the english tongue. This mighty work drew on him, indeed, the bitter hatred of all who were making merchandise of the popular credulity and ignorance, but he found an abundant reward in the blessing of his countrymen, of every rank and age, to whom he unfolded the words of eternal life. His mortal remains were interred near this spot, but they were not allowed to rest in peace. After the lapse of many years, his bones were dragged from the grave, and consigned to the flames, and his ashes were cast into the waters of the adjoining stream.*

## John Wycliffe

1324	Born in the hamlet of Hipswell, half a mile from the village of Wycliffe, near Richmond in Yorkshire.
1340	Sent to college at Oxford to study philosophy and Christianity
1356	Master of Balliol College
1361	Ordained priest, nominated for the Rectorship of Fillingham in Lincolnshire
1372	Took his degree as a Doctor of Divinity. Entered the service of the crown. Sent to Bruges as a member of a Commission to negotiate with Papal delegates about the amount of money in dues that should be paid to them by England. During this period he gave lectures in which he argued that England could lawfully hold back Papal dues. He was also an outspoken critic of the Mendicant Friars, an order of begging monks, whom he considered to be corrupt. He argued that the Church should be reformed and that nothing should come between man and the Word of God. These attacks culminated in his branding the Pope a heretic and questioning his authority in a corrupt Church hierarchy.
1374	Made Rector of the parish of Lutterworth (his previous parish was Ludgershall near Oxford).
1377	Accused of error by the Bishop of London before the Archbishop of Canterbury in St. Paul's Cathedral. Saved by John of Gaunt's intervention. There were five Papal bulls issued condemning Wycliffe.
1378	Accused of heresy at Lambeth – saved by the Queen Mother
1381	Withdrew from Oxford to work at Lutterworth. Prolific period of writing and translation
1382	Council at Blackfriars condemned Wycliffe. Wycliffe summoned to Rome, but pleaded ill health having suffered a stroke.
1384	Suffered a second stroke at Lutterworth whilst in church. He died peacefully at home on New Year's Eve.
1428	Wycliffe's remains exhumed, burned and scattered in the Swift. As his ashes were dispersed into the ocean, "so the whole world became his sepulchre, as the whole of Christendom become his convert".