

## **“To the honour and worship of Almighty God and his saints:” Lay Patronage at All Saints’ Parish Church, Bristol**

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*Parish Churches: Woefully Neglected*

There are more than 9,000 parish churches of medieval origin in Britain,<sup>1</sup> and this striking figure can be interpreted in two very different ways. First, one may believe that this high volume renders these structures commonplace in comparison to their more imposing counterparts—the great cathedrals. It is easy to favor towering, resplendent structures like Westminster Abbey and Wells Cathedral—the churches of kings<sup>2</sup> and bishops<sup>3</sup>—over the humble community churches of the common people.

An alternative interpretation of the existence of thousands of parish churches sees these numbers providing almost overwhelming opportunities for research. According to medievalist Paul Williamson, the multitudes of parish churches that exist in England are no less valuable than cathedrals in providing an impression of their original late medieval appearance and function.<sup>4</sup> This is especially true in cases where parish church documents—churchwarden’s accounts, inventories, wills, and the like—still exist. Many parishes were stripped of their ornament in the sixteenth century during the English Reformation, as the country broke from the Catholic church. “From Cumberland to Kent, from Bristol to Bury St. Edmunds...the altars were drawn down and the walls whited, windows broken or blotted out to conceal ‘feigned miracles’...veils and vestments, chalices and chests and hangings, the accumulation of generations of pious donations, were surrendered to the King’s commissioners, to be unstitched, broken up, or melted down.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, countless objects across England were destroyed, leaving comparably few traces of late medieval art, architecture, and religious practice for examination today. Written documents, however, were not an active target of the Reformation. In some cases they are the best resource available for understanding and imagining the appearance, importance, and role of parish churches in the late medieval era. They provide glimpses of very personal relationships between the laity and the churches they used, and help to discern some of the ways in which benefactors could actively shape the interiors of these buildings to assert their authority within the community, and obtain prayers for salvation after death. Additionally, the laity helped form the congregation’s sensory perception of the Mass through donations of objects that engaged sight, touch, and sound. This will be demonstrated through the use of primary source texts written in fifteenth century English and accompanying modern translations of those texts, surviving artistic and architectural elements, and secondary interpretations of medieval documents. Original fifteenth century wills, churchwarden accounts, and inventories can be extremely thorough and difficult to follow; therefore, this research requires careful close reading of a high volume of documents spanning decades. Constructing a visual narrative based solely on written word is challenging, yet ultimately rewarding in cases in which a church’s religious art objects do not survive. Doing so can lead to significant revelations about the realities of late medieval religion.

*All Saints', Bristol*

All Saints' parish church in Bristol, England is an excellent example of its type. The church was first constructed in the Norman period c. 1140<sup>6</sup> and thoroughly renovated in the medieval Perpendicular style in the mid fifteenth century.<sup>7</sup> Characteristic of this design are vertical lines found in window tracery, enlarged windows, and remodeled interior stories to create a unified "vertical expanse."<sup>8</sup>

All Saints' is located in the heart of the Old City, a very busy and thus perpetually vulnerable section of downtown Bristol. Most of the area's medieval buildings were replaced in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and even more were destroyed in 1940 during the Bristol Blitz, a Nazi bombing campaign that decimated much of the oldest parts of the city.<sup>9</sup> All Saints', therefore, is a rare surviving structure that miraculously triumphed over unfavorable odds. Despite the church's decisive victory over complete demolition, its present state is not an exact representation of its medieval Perpendicular-style phase of construction. The church underwent further renovation in the eighteenth through twentieth centuries, during which time the medieval bell tower, north wall, west wall, clergy house, chancel, and stained glass windows were reconstructed.<sup>10</sup> What remains of All Saints' medieval architectural features are portions of piers, capitals, and arches from its original Norman construction, and parts of the fifteenth century nave and aisles.<sup>11</sup>

Unfortunately, as is the case with many parish churches in England, none of All Saints' art objects from the medieval era still exist, and what happened to them is unknown.<sup>12</sup> The most notable works found in All Saints' today are all of eighteenth and nineteenth century origin, commissioned during the remodeling campaigns of that era.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, neither the architectural nor the artistic programs of All Saints' today are satisfactory representations of the church's medieval heritage. This leaves people without an answer to an important question: In an era where imagery of all kinds was essential to the main function of the church<sup>14</sup>—the liturgy—what was All Saints' visual program like, and how did it affect the community's perception of the Mass? Fortunately, in All Saints' case, there is another rich type of evidence that enables those interested to better understand the church's medieval appearance.

A multitude of All Saints' written records still exist, and they offer tremendous insights on not only the form of the church, but its function and year-by-year operations as well. These records include the All Saints' church book, comprised of: lists of parish staff, debtors, benefactors and their donations; church inventories; a list of churchwardens; and the wardens' accounts.<sup>15</sup> Other churchwardens' accounts survive outside the book as loose documents.<sup>16</sup>

Many wills and records of chantries—daily Masses celebrated to "expedite the salvation" of those who established and funded them<sup>17</sup>—also exist within the church's archives. Clive Burgess, who compiled and published these records, has asserted that "other parishes may have better inventories or fuller accounts, but overall none can match [All Saints']"<sup>18</sup> The sheer volume of these documents makes them an excellent resource with which to understand the relationship between a parish church, its lay audience, and the surrounding community, in the absence of art historical artifacts.

Upon examination of these records, it is clear that lay patronage and involvement in the daily life of the church both played an essential role in the culture of All Saints' in the fifteenth century. There are two reasons for this phenomenon. First, in the early half of the fifteenth century,

England was engaged in the Hundred Years' War against France. Laypeople were encouraged to donate to their local parish churches as a way to secure divine favor, thereby ensuring England's victory.<sup>19</sup> The rationale was that if God was on their side, He would not be on France's as well. Second, and more relevant to this research, is that Christianity at the time was preoccupied mainly with death and the afterlife.

Many churchgoers attempted to secure their place in heaven or lessen their time in Purgatory through donations to the church (both of objects and of money) or through incessant prayer.<sup>20</sup> This explains the appearance of chantries in All Saints' records. A chantry was a series of daily Masses commissioned by church parishioners for the benefit of their souls. The wealthiest members of the laity, then, had an advantage when it came to redeeming themselves—these donations, though piously motivated, were expensive.<sup>21</sup>

The average medieval Bristolian could not afford to make large contributions to the church. This spiritual tradition had another, more widespread consequence—as the most affluent parishioners commissioned chantries and made scores of donations of religious objects to All Saints', the program and the appearance of the Mass began to change. Patronage of only a few individuals at All Saints' ultimately had a considerable effect on the parish's 200 communicants.<sup>22</sup>

### *Thomas and Joan Halleway*

Two families in particular stand out in All Saints' records as exceptional patrons, both of whom were investing in All Saints' in the name of God, as the documents indicate.<sup>23</sup> The first is that of Thomas and Joan Halleway, who lived during the first half of the fifteenth century. Thomas Halleway was intensively involved with All Saints' and the city of Bristol during his lifetime—he served as churchwarden sporadically between 1411 and 1443.<sup>24</sup> Thomas also served as mayor, sheriff, and bailiff of Bristol before his death in 1453.<sup>25</sup> In the years leading up to his death, he and his wife commissioned a perpetual chantry for the benefit of their souls, to be celebrated daily “for evermore,” as well as several rich objects.<sup>26</sup> It was rare for adults to establish perpetual chantries if they had heirs—Thomas and Joan had three sons; however, all three were priests,<sup>27</sup> making it highly unlikely that there would be future generations of Halleways. In this sense, it is understandable that the elder Halleways would want Mass to be perpetually celebrated in their name within their community. Though the clergy at All Saints' discontinued the Halleway chantry Mass only fifty years<sup>28</sup> after it was commissioned, stopping rather short of eternity, its effect on the community was nevertheless significant.

### *The Chantry*

The process of obtaining a chantry was an arduous one—in the Halleways' case, it took about three years.<sup>29</sup> The family had to obtain written permission from King Henry V and Queen Margaret, the bishop, the vicar, the churchwardens, and members of the laity before the chantry could be celebrated.<sup>30</sup> At the end of the process, the chantry priest—the clergy member who would celebrate Thomas Halleway's Mass—needed to swear an oath of loyalty and obedience to All Saints' and its authorities. The Halleways themselves chose this priest; in fact, they chose their own son,

clergy member Thomas Junior.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, the oath was sworn to either the vicar or rector during Mass in the presence of the laity.<sup>32</sup> Thus, even before it began—before the Halleways established a visual program—the chantry involved the community. Each parishioner acted as a witness to the oath, therefore holding the chantry priest accountable to his terms of employment.

### *The Objects*

The terms of the chantry, once it was made legal in 1453<sup>33</sup>, offer further evidence that Thomas and Joan Halleway's contributions—both verbal in the format of their liturgy and physical in the form of religious art objects—greatly affected parishioners' experience at Mass. The Halleways' decision to use All Saints' nave altar honoring St. John the Baptist, St. John the Evangelist, and St. Dunstan led to fundamental changes in the altar's function and appearance. The family paid for the installation of pews in front of their chosen altar, where before there had been none.<sup>34</sup> This essentially designated the altar of the two St. Johns and St. Dunstan as the Halleways' "private chantry chapel"<sup>35</sup>—although any parishioner could attend Mass held in the Halleways' name, the knowledge that one was praying for Thomas' soul while sitting in one of his pews certainly shifted the focus of the Mass towards its benefactors. Another donation of great significance by the Halleways to All Saints' was an allocation of funds to be used only on candles and lamp oil. For decades following both Thomas and Joan's death, their money kept the altar of St. John the Baptist, St. John the Evangelist, and St. Dunstan as well as the high altar alight.<sup>36</sup> As unremarkable as pews and candles may seem, one must recognize that both of these were utterly irreplaceable within the visual program of the liturgy. Parishioners needed pews for a place to observe the Mass—without the Halleways' pews, there might never have been a Mass offered at their special altar. The Halleways, therefore, forever changed the liturgy as it was offered at All Saints'. Additionally, once seated in pews, parishioners needed to see what was happening before them; thus indicating the obvious necessity of candles and lamps.

According to the terms of the chantry, the Halleways provided eight shillings per year "to have the lamp continually burn before the high altar."<sup>37</sup> Eight shillings in 1453 is equivalent to about £285 today (\$350).<sup>38</sup> As the chantry was practiced at All Saints' for fifty years, the total sum donated by the Halleways to keep the high altar alight was about £14,250 (\$17,523). The dedication of such a large sum of money to this purpose is indicative of the Halleways' desire to establish a clear role of prestige and influence at All Saints'. Additionally, it helps to explain the symbolic and sensory value of instruments of light in a medieval parish church. The maintenance of sources of light, in fact, was the "single most popular expression of piety in the wills of the late medieval laity."<sup>39</sup> Candles, lamps, and torches were used to emphasize the most significant parts of the Mass and were indispensable within the ritual programs of the holiest days of the year. For example, torches were lit at the altar at the moment of the elevation of the Eucharist so that the audience could glimpse the Host.<sup>40</sup> This was of great consequence to the laity, who sometimes ran from their seats towards the altar in excitement.<sup>41</sup> The awe generated by the partial visibility of the Eucharist—which was illuminated from the torches, but still obscured in part by what is called the rood screen—generated a powerful sensory experience that added drama to the Mass. Light also played an important role in Candlemas, a yearly feast second in liturgical value only to occasions such as Christmas and Easter.<sup>42</sup> As the name suggests, Candlemas consisted of an elaborate procession, in which each member of the laity carried a blessed candle. The Mass was full of

symbolic references to candles and light, which equated them to forces capable of banishing evil.<sup>43</sup> This served to activate the imaginations of the laity, who incorporated themes of the power of light into fictional texts such as *A Hundred Merry Tales*, in which a frightened man uses blessed candles to banish a demon (who is really his neighbor in a demon costume) from his home.<sup>44</sup> The preeminence of actual lights and the symbolic virtues of lights to the liturgy—as well as the lives of the laity—explains why the Halleways would spend the equivalent of thousands of pounds to keep the high altar illuminated. A seemingly menial function, light was, in reality, of immeasurable value to the basic and more nuanced functions of All Saints’ as a parish church.

As well as these additions to All Saints’, the Halleways also donated several more religious works of art. Churchwardens created an inventory for the chantry in 1457<sup>45</sup> once it was underway and integrated into the church’s daily operations. This inventory reveals that the Halleways donated many valuable objects made of precious metals or fine fabrics to serve the operation of their Mass. The two works of art that had the greatest effect on parishioners’ perception of the Mass were “a pax of silver with a Trinity enameled and gilded” and an altar cloth “of the passion” on the upper part and “with the three kings of Cologne,” or the three wise men, on the lower part.<sup>46</sup> Both of these objects were prominent in the liturgy both physically and visually; parishioners came into contact with them in multiple ways.

### *The Pax*

A pax is a disk or rectangle used during the medieval era in an important liturgical ritual called the “Kiss of Peace,” delivered once a week on Sundays. The ritual was representative of the peace God brought humanity through reconciliation and was designed to “free the heart of worldly hatred.”<sup>47</sup> During the ritual, the pax was passed throughout the audience. Parishioners would kiss the image on the front of the pax as it was handed to them. The kissing order was usually determined by social rank,<sup>48</sup> which sometimes led to disruptions of the Mass, thus defeating the ritual’s peacemaking purpose. For example, at one parish church near London, a woman threw the pax to the floor during Mass, smashing it because another woman had been allowed to kiss it before her.<sup>49</sup>

During a Mass in Essex, one man struck a clergy member over the head with the pax, causing him to bleed profusely. The man was enraged because he had been the second to kiss it, not the first, as he believed was deserving of his status.<sup>50</sup> No such incident appears in the records of All Saints’, however, which suggests that the pax resulted in more positive outcomes within the community. This ritual would arguably have heightened community involvement and connection on a physical level. Not only were all parishioners permitted to gaze upon the Trinity wrought in enameled silver on All Saints’ pax, they could also engage with it intimately by holding it. This shared gesture linked parishioners with the Holy Trinity and with other parishioners. It would probably have created a sense of accord among the community. Eamon Duffy, a medieval historian, defines Sunday rituals such as these as a form of “maintenance of blessing, healing, and peace”<sup>51</sup> between churchgoers. Additionally, the sensory impact on the parishioners of handling such an object was likely considerable. The silver tablet would have gleamed in the church’s candlelight, reflecting traces of color from around the church and catching the eyes of the congregation. The pax was most likely handled very frequently and enthusiastically as a result. Although there is no way of confirming this because the All Saints’ pax no longer exists, the two

paxes in figures 3 and 4 show signs of intense wear. The fine details of each pax have been rubbed off to the point that each figure's features are no longer discernable. The silver pax, which weighed eight ounces,<sup>52</sup> would have been worth about £1,784 (\$2,184) today.<sup>53</sup> There is no reference to a pax of such high quality at All Saints' in the inventory completed in 1395 before the Halleways' donation,<sup>54</sup> and in the inventory completed in 1469 after their donation, their pax is the only one mentioned.<sup>55</sup> Thus, the Halleways' pax facilitated the celebration of the Kiss of Peace ritual with such a rich artistic object at All Saints' on a weekly basis, for years. Their patronage, therefore, changed the parishioners' experience with the ritual, having a widespread effect on the church's entire lay population.

### *The Altar Cloth*

The Halleways' altar cloth depicting the crucifixion and the three wise men, though never passed around the audience, was also clearly visible to the parishioners of the Halleyway chantry Mass. There was no rood screen in front of St. Dunstan's altar;<sup>56</sup> thus, the altar and its adornments were not obscured. The specific imagery on the altar cloth therefore played a role in the liturgical program—many audience members must have spent a good deal of the Mass focusing their attention on the altar. Gazing at the altar cloth, then, was inevitable. This made the choice of imagery to be displayed on the cloth all the more significant.

The story of the three wise men was popular during the medieval era, as evidenced by the existence of several fifteenth-century manuscripts telling their tale<sup>57</sup> and many depictions of them in varied media in churches across England.<sup>58</sup> They are described as the “three kings of Cologne” in the All Saints' inventory because a shrine at Cologne Cathedral has housed their remains since 1164, and many pilgrims travelled hundreds of miles across Europe to Cologne to see the relics, ensuring that people in Bristol knew about the shrine.<sup>59</sup> What effect would this familiar image, embroidered onto a cloth, out of reach and partially obscured from the view of the audience, have had on parishioners? Although the cloth was likely impossible to see fully for a member of the audience because the altar was off-limits to the laity,<sup>60</sup> the power of its imagery within the Mass should not be understated. Images like this appear every day in the twenty-first century, but there must be an attempt to understand the efficacy of imagery in the fifteenth century when they were far less commonplace. Medievalist Margaret Aston describes the use of artistic images in medieval England as that of a “transmitter, recalling into the viewer's mind known persons and events and the virtues and qualities of the absent. This process might bring into recollection holy figures of the past, or the rulers of the present...it was accepted that the signifying image was worthy of the honour of the signified.”<sup>61</sup> Thus, looking at an image of the three wise men on an altar cloth was akin to looking at the three wise men in the flesh. As a “transmitter,” figures on the altar cloth imparted onto the viewer their values—namely, wisdom and devotion to Christ. This personal exchange between parishioner and image was powerful—and would not have been part of the audience's experience at Mass were it not for the Halleyway chantry.

Perhaps an even more visceral and engaging image was that of Christ's Passion on the altar cloth. The entirety of the Mass led up to the Transfiguration (the moment at which the bread and wine was believed to transform into the actual body and blood of Christ) and the distribution of the Eucharist—these moments were the pinnacle of the liturgy, as the body of Christ “was the focus of all the hopes and aspirations of late medieval religion.”<sup>62</sup> To gaze upon the Crucifixion while

the bread and wine transformed into the body and blood of Jesus Christ, as Christians believed it did, must have been remarkable. One could visualize Christ's sacrifice on the cross while looking at the altar cloth, and see the redemption of humankind made possible by that sacrifice come to fruition as the priest prepared the bread and wine. Surviving examples of medieval altar cloths displaying the Passion are sumptuous and rich in detail, their materials enhancing the viewer's experience. The aim of such a visual program was to provide a "scriptural symbol for conveying the depth of a merciful God's love for humankind."<sup>63</sup> One was meant to think, as one looked at the altar cloth, of God's sacrifice of His only son so that they could be nourished with the body and blood of Christ.

Although participants in the Mass did not physically engage with the altar cloth as they did with the pax, the combination of a visual aide (the image of the Crucifixion) and the administration of the Eucharist (involving smell, touch, and taste) allowed for a multisensory experience that undoubtedly had a significant effect on each parishioner. It is certain that All Saints' was not the only parish church in England to use an altar cloth adorned with the Crucifixion made from dyed fabric<sup>64</sup>—however, when one considers that the Hallelways' altar cloth was surrounded by objects commissioned by the Hallelways, it is clear that community members' experience at the chantry Mass was unique.

#### *Mass Schedule and Organization*

The Hallelways' contributions to the parishioners' experience at Mass were not only visual; the structure and even the time at which the Mass was celebrated were dictated according to the terms of the chantry as well. Specifically tailored to the working class, the chantry was held "at the hour of six ...in the summertime and at the hour of seven...in the wintertime"<sup>65</sup> every day. Masses at these times were called "morrow Masses," specifically meant to cater to laborers and artisans who would begin the day's work after leaving the church.<sup>66</sup> This working class likely comprised the majority of the population in fifteenth-century Bristol, suggesting that the Hallelway chantry served both a practical purpose and reached a high volume of parishioners. The chantry took into account both the communal interests of the parish and the personal interests of the Hallelways—the Mass fit conveniently into people's schedules and allowed for a large amount of people to celebrate Mass in the name of the Hallelways' souls.

As dictated by the chantry's legal documents, the Hallelway chantry priest was required to celebrate a Mass of Our Lady and a Requiem Mass once a week.<sup>67</sup> The Mass of Our Lady is a liturgical format comprised of five hymns written in the fourteenth century.<sup>68</sup> A Requiem Mass was meant to honor the dead, and the celebratory hymns typically sung during Mass were omitted from this format.<sup>69</sup> In these two cases, not only did the Hallelways dictate the visual elements, but the aural elements, too, hinged on Thomas and Joan's preferences. One's experience at an Our Lady Mass on one's way to work in the morning was determined almost exclusively by the chantry's patrons: a parishioner could attend a conveniently scheduled Mass, hear the hymns of an Our Lady liturgical program, and use objects in liturgical rituals all due to the donations and preferences of one married couple. According to Eamon Duffy, "the liturgy lay at the heart of medieval religion, and the Mass lay at the heart of the liturgy."<sup>70</sup> Thus, for the parishioners at All Saints', the liturgical program put in place by the Hallelways defined a large part of their experiences of religion. The chantry, which enhanced the Kiss of Peace ritual, the visual effects of

the altar cloth, and the specific masses celebrated each week, shaped community members' definitions of what Christianity was. A second family at All Saints', living almost two decades after the deaths of Thomas and Joan Halleway, also had an incalculable effect on parishioners' experiences at Mass.

### *Alice and Henry Chester*

Alice and Henry Chester's background is similar to that of the Halleways. Like Thomas and Joan, Alice and Henry were a wealthy couple, well connected within Bristol society. Henry served in multiple civic positions, including sheriff and bailiff,<sup>71</sup> in the two decades following Thomas Halleway's death. As Henry aged further, he and Alice established a chantry to be celebrated in their name upon their deaths, which was to take place every Friday for twelve years.<sup>72</sup> Henry died in 1470; thus, the chantry was said only in his name for twelve years. Alice died in 1485 after the terms of the original chantry had run out, but she had established more chantries during her time as a widow, including special masses yearly on St. Valentine's Day and the anniversary of her husband's death.<sup>73</sup> During her fifteen years as a widow, Alice Chester was a remarkable patron of All Saints' church. This couple's chantry came with comparatively few stipulations; unlike that of the Halleways, the Chesters did not dictate the hymns to be sung or make accommodations for the schedules of artisans and laborers. Additionally, the Halleway chantry Mass was celebrated daily (though occasionally with interruption, as shown by parish records) for fifty years, while the Chester chantry was celebrated far less frequently. Despite this, Alice Chester undoubtedly changed the audience's perception of most Masses (not only those of her husband's chantry) at All Saints' in the second half of the fifteenth century through her extensive campaign to furnish the church. Alice's donations of religious art objects fully informed the visual liturgical program at All Saints' even after her death, likely up until the Reformation began in the 1530s. They include a statue of the Trinity, a painted frontal and tabernacle at the Lady Altar, a carved frontal at the Rood Altar, a brass basin for the weekly ritual of relic washing, a silver and enamel crucifix, a massive rood loft at the High Altar, and a hearse cloth.<sup>74</sup> The most significant of Alice's donations were the hearse cloth, the refurbishment of the rood altar and the Lady altar, and the new rood loft in front of the high altar. All of these objects and additions to the visual program at All Saints' completely changed the church's appearance, thus affecting parishioners' perceptions of the Mass.

### *The Hearse Cloth*

Very few medieval hearse cloths still exist today, and Alice Chester's cloth is no exception to that rule. Luckily, it was described quite thoroughly in the church records: it was "of black worsted [wool] with letters of gold of H & C & A & C and a scripture in gold" that said, translated here from Latin, "pray for the souls of Henry Chester and Alice his wife."<sup>75</sup> This cloth was used to cover the coffins at all of All Saints' funerals, "thereby transforming every funeral into a commemoration of [Alice] and her husband."<sup>76</sup> In the fifteenth century this was considered a generous contribution. According to the church records, Alice commissioned the cloth for "the love and honour that she had unto almighty God and to all Christian souls, and for the ease and succor of all this parish."<sup>77</sup> No matter Alice's true motivation for donating the cloth—whether it be



to generate prayers for her and her husband's souls, out of the kindness of her heart, to increase her stature in the community, or a mix of all three—it certainly had an effect on parishioners' perception of funerals at All Saints'. The cloth, inscribed with its donors' names, seems somewhat similar to twenty-first century corporate sponsorships of events—wealthy patrons prompting parishioners to pray for them is a fifteenth-century version of “brought to you by Coca-Cola.” These incessant reminders remain in the back of one's mind—tainting, in the case of Bristol, one's experience at a funeral. Anyone's funeral at All Saints' generated attention for the Chesters, whether the deceased knew them or not. Regardless of the cloth's reception, its constant presence changed the focus of funerals from solely the deceased to both the deceased and the Chester family.

### *The Rood Altar*

Rood screens were common features in late medieval parish churches. A rood screen is a wooden or stone architectural element that separates the high altar from the rest of the church. Many rood screens had elaborately decorated rood lofts, which acted as the crossbeams connecting the vertical elements of the screens.<sup>78</sup> All Saints' rood altar was located next to St. Dunstan's altar in the far right corner of the front of church.<sup>79</sup> Between 1470 and 1485, Alice Chester commissioned a new carved front to the rood altar “with five principle images: one of Saint Anne, the second of Mary Magdalene, the third of Saint Giles, the fourth of Saint Erasmus, the fifth of Saint Anthony.”<sup>80</sup> This specific program of saintly imagery catered to the preferences of Alice, its benefactor, but it also reflected the devotional tastes of the lay community. The figures that appeared on All Saints' altars—and any parish church—were “the saints late medieval men and women regarded with the most affection and confidence.”<sup>81</sup> Thus, the specific holy men and women that appeared on the rood altar are likely indicative of the interests of both patron and community. This unique set of saints point to the particular concerns of the population in the second half of the fifteenth century.

Saint Anne was the mother of the Virgin Mary, and it is likely that parishioners believed she deserved at least some devotion, as All Saints' had plenty of images and an entire altar dedicated solely to her daughter.<sup>82</sup> She was also the object of devotion for women who needed help with conception, pregnancy, and birth<sup>83</sup>. Mary Magdalene became a popular model for several archetypes in the medieval era. She was a reformed prostitute, which was a testament to the efficacy of penance, and she was a successful convert to Christianity.<sup>84</sup> Saint Giles is the patron saint of the physically disabled<sup>85</sup> due to an incident in which a member of the French Royal Hunt shot the Saint with an arrow while trying to kill a deer.<sup>86</sup> Saint Erasmus is the patron saint of sailors<sup>87</sup>—a practical addition to the altar front, as Bristol is a port city. Finally, Saint Anthony, a son of a wealthy couple, renounced his worldly possessions and adopted a life of poverty in the desert, making him a model for asceticism and monasticism.<sup>88</sup>

These particular five saints speak volumes about the interests of the lay community at All Saints', as well as about Alice Chester's sensitivity to these interests. In the case of the rood altar, both patron and community dictated the Mass' visual program. Had Alice not seen it fit to remodel the rood altar, however, this particular outcome may not have been the case—if another patron had commissioned a new altar front, it may have included depictions of different saints, chosen from the hundreds in existence. It was Alice Chester's preferences very likely combined

with those of the parish that resulted in this fascinating variety of saintly figures. Worship at the rood altar, then, was changed forever with the addition of these images: parishioners could have an object of devotion to focus on when praying for a successful pregnancy and birth, a disabled family member or a sailor, for seeking guidance in reducing attachment to material wealth, or for pursuing penance. The omission of, for example, St. Erasmus from the rood altar likely would not have stopped a parishioner from praying for the disabled if that was something they were occupied with. It would, however, have changed the way a parishioner would have prayed for the disabled: having an image to direct one's prayers to added a heightened level of engagement to the act. Gazing upon the face of St. Erasmus—who was disabled—made for a more intimate prayer session, engaging one's sense of sight. Given the extraordinary proliferation of images in churches in this period, it seems likely that having depictions on which to focus made prayers more powerful. Perhaps parishioners were comforted by the presence of an image to pray directly to, rather than merely sending prayers out into space, hoping that someone would hear them. In addition, Alice paid for the gilding of the rood altar surrounding the saints, allowing for a more sumptuous and visually engaging image program.<sup>89</sup>

### *The Rood Loft*

Alice Chester's commission of the rood loft in front of All Saints' high altar is undoubtedly her greatest donation to the church, both in size and significance. Completed in 1483,<sup>90</sup> the rood loft was situated atop the rood screen at the eastern end of the nave, just in front of the church's largest altar. Her motives for this donation, as stated in the church records, exemplify the relationship between patron, parish, and parishioners: "Alice...considering the rood loft of this church was but single and no thing [of] beauty, according to parish [intent], she, taking to her counsel the worshipful of this parish...to the honour and worship of almighty God and his saints, and of her special devotion unto this church, has let to be made a new rood loft in carved work filled with twenty-two images."<sup>91</sup> From these records, it can be understood that Alice noticed on her own that the church needed a new rood loft, indicating her agency in choosing which parts of All Saints' to furnish. Additionally, she donated the loft not only for her own satisfaction but also for the benefit of God himself and of the parishioners, for whom she seemed to have high regard. Before commissioning the loft, however, she is at least credited with seeking the counsel of parish members to confirm the necessity of the donation. If she actually did so, then parishioners had input into the visual program that they were to view and engage with during Mass. This was especially important in the case of the rood loft—for Masses celebrated at the high altar, the rood screen and loft were the focal point of the liturgy for the congregation. They were physical barriers to the altar, and therefore needed to be visually engaging—for the parishioners who could not catch a glimpse of the altar, the screen and loft were the most accessible artistic liturgical components of the Mass. This accounts for the twenty-two carved figures on the rood loft, which included a Trinity at the center, St. Christopher on one end, and St. Michael at the other.<sup>92</sup> It can be difficult to imagine such a structure filled with so many figures, and how engrossing it must have been to examine each figure during Mass. Fortunately, a similar rood loft still exists at St. Anno's at Llananno,<sup>93</sup> a Welsh parish church less than 100 miles from Bristol. This stunning exercise in woodcarving, constructed within fifteen years of the commission of the All Saints' rood loft,<sup>94</sup> features twenty-five holy figures. It is certainly as visually rich as the All Saints' rood loft was.

Unlike Alice Chester's side altar front, which is known to have featured a specific repertoire of five saints, it is currently impossible to determine the identities of all twenty-two figures that were on the All Saints' rood loft. The St. Anno loft therefore provides valuable insight on the effect this donation had on the visual program of the Mass. Similar to the aims of the smaller altar front at the rood altar, the images of holy figures on the rood loft likely enhanced the experience of prayer and devotion during the Mass.

For example, praying to St. Christopher, featured at the end of the loft, ensured that one would not die suddenly later on in the day.<sup>95</sup> Parishioners could choose from twenty-one other saints and their corresponding areas of expertise, making them the focal point of their prayers during the Mass. The St. Anno loft reinforces the likely reasons for this element of choice; it illustrates the great variety of devotional objects available to All Saints' audience. The rood loft dominated parishioners' line of sight; whatever was shown on it would likely shape what the audience thought about during Mass. Alice Chester was gracious enough to provide an exceptional collection of images for people to engage with—one parishioner could focus their devotional practices on a range of different figures over time.

Not all medieval parish churches' rood lofts displayed a multitude of holy figures—Alice Chester could have commissioned a simpler loft that would have obstructed the altar just as well as an ornate one. At this point, however, it should be clear that her tastes aligned with the sumptuous and the elaborate. If Alice had been a lover of the austere, it is certain that All Saints' appearance would have been far different from what is described in its records. Her effect on parishioners' perceptions of the Mass are incalculable—her preferences permeated every corner of the building. One simply could not attend Mass at All Saints' in the late fifteenth century without laying eyes on one of Alice Chester's commissions. Like the Halleway chantry and its corresponding objects, the donations of Alice Chester represented not only the Mass, but the whole sensory and ritual experience of Christianity to members of the All Saints' community. Funerals brought to mind the benefactions of Alice and her husband, as did prayers directed to St. Erasmus or St. Christopher based on their likenesses at their respective altars. Without the patronage of Alice Chester in the late fifteenth century, the visual program at All Saints'—and therefore, parishioners' perception of the Mass—would undoubtedly have been very different. Alice's preferences allowed for a massive increase in imagery at All Saints, providing a multitude of options for devotion.

### *Conclusion*

The survival of All Saints' church records for more than five centuries is nothing short of a miracle. Without these primary sources, there would be an extremely limited understanding of the church's history, function, and appearance. Thankfully, the multitude of inventories, wills, chantries, and churchwarden's accounts that are available today provide an invaluable perspective regarding late medieval Christianity.

The donations of both the Halleways in the mid fifteenth century and Alice Chester in the late fifteenth century combined to create a unique visual program, understanding of the liturgy, and sensory experience that likely survived at All Saints' until the Reformation in the mid sixteenth century. Both families' contributions in terms of Mass structure and schedule, options for devotional prayer, and thought-provoking imagery defined not only the liturgy, but the

religious experience itself for parishioners who interacted with these donations. This religious experience was expressed through sensory engagement prompted by each family's donations.

There are thousands of parish churches in England that deserve scholarly attention, but have yet to receive it. As evidenced by this paper, it is certain that each of these churches can offer masses of art historical insight, as long as their records survive. Original churchwarden accounts, wills, and chantry documents, as well as subsequent translations and interpretations of these records, can be synthesized to partially reconstruct structures, objects, and experiences that have been lost to the world. Additionally, plentiful contemporary visual comparanda enhance one's ability to envision these buildings. To reiterate Paul Binski's call to action: "it would be hard to think of a field of enquiry quite as rich, and indeed quite as threatened, as medieval English parish churches."<sup>96</sup> These structures are viable candidates for not only papers, books, and articles, but also for emerging tools that aid in visualization and digital reconstruction. With the passage of time, the full potential of these structures' value will be realized—at which point, one can hope that one will be able to both read about and actually visualize a fully-furnished medieval parish church.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Binski, "The English Parish Church and its Art in the Later Middle Ages: A Review of the Problem," *Studies in Iconography* 20 (1999): 1.

<sup>2</sup> Westminster Abbey has been the coronation chapel for English royalty since 1066; its medieval Gothic renovation began in 1245. John Cannon, ed., *A Dictionary of British History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 672.

<sup>3</sup> Bishops Jocelin and Reginald in Wells, England, oversaw the construction of Wells Cathedral the 1220s. Henry Luttikhuisen and Dorothy Verkerk, *Snyder's Medieval Art, Second Edition* (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Education, Inc., 2006), 396.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Williamson, "The Parish Church," *Gothic: Art for England 1400-1547* (London: V&A Publications, 2003), 376.

<sup>5</sup> Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 478.

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Foyle, *Pevsner City Guides: Bristol* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 7.

<sup>7</sup> Foyle, *Pevsner City Guides*, 93.

<sup>8</sup> *Britannica Academic*, "Perpendicular style," *Encyclopedia Britannica* (2016), accessed 1 March 2016, <http://academic.eb.com.libproxy.temple.edu/EBchecked/topic/452489/Perpendicular-style>.

<sup>9</sup> Bristol City Council's City Design Group, "Old City: Medieval Core Public Realm Scoping Study," Bristol City Council (2012), 13.

<sup>10</sup> Foyle, *Pevsner City Guides*, 94.

<sup>11</sup> Foyle, *Pevsner City Guides*, 92-93.

<sup>12</sup> Confirmed to the author via email from medievalist Clive Burgess, March 11, 2016.

<sup>13</sup> Foyle, *Pevsner City Guides*, 93.

<sup>14</sup> Eamon Duffy, "Late Medieval Religion," *Gothic: Art for England 1400-1547* (London: V&A Publications, 2003): 57.

<sup>15</sup> Clive Burgess, *The Pre-Reformation Records of All Saints', Bristol: Part 1* (Bristol: Bristol Records Society, 1995), xxii-xxiii.

<sup>16</sup> Clive Burgess, *The Pre-Reformation Records of All Saints', Bristol: Part 2* (Bristol: Bristol Records Society, 2000), 5.

- <sup>17</sup> Clive Burgess, "Chantry in the Parish, or 'Through the looking-glass,'" *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* 164 (2012): 100.
- <sup>18</sup> Burgess, *The Pre-Reformation Records of All Saints': Part 1*, xi.
- <sup>19</sup> Clive Burgess, *The Pre-Reformation Records of All Saints', Bristol: Part 3* (Bristol: Bristol Record Society, 2004), xx.
- <sup>20</sup> Duffy, "Late Medieval Religion," 57.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>22</sup> Burgess, *The Pre-Reformation Records of All Saints': Part 1*, xii.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 14-15.
- <sup>24</sup> Burgess, *The Pre-Reformation Records of All Saints': Part 1*, 5, 53, 72.
- <sup>25</sup> Burgess, *The Pre-Reformation Records of All Saints': Part 3*, 72.
- <sup>26</sup> Francis Bickley, ed., *The Little Red Book of Bristol*, vol. 2 (Bristol: W. Crofton Hemmons, 1901), 200.
- <sup>27</sup> Burgess, *The Pre-Reformation Records of All Saints': Part 3*, 72.
- <sup>28</sup> Burgess, *The Pre-Reformation Records of All Saints': Part 1.*, 133.
- <sup>29</sup> E.G.C.F. Atchley, "The Hallesway Chantry at the Parish Church of All Saints', Bristol, and the Hallesway Family," *Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society* 24 (1901): 80.
- <sup>30</sup> Atchley, "The Hallesway Chantry," 79-80.
- <sup>31</sup> Burgess, *The Pre-Reformation Records of All Saints: Part 3*, 73.
- <sup>32</sup> Atchley, "The Hallesway Chantry," 78.
- <sup>33</sup> Bickley, *The Little Red Book of Bristol vol. 2*, 200.
- <sup>34</sup> Burgess, *The Pre-Reformation Records of All Saints': Part 3*, 74.
- <sup>35</sup> Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, 116.
- <sup>36</sup> Burgess, *The Pre-Reformation Records of All Saints': Part 3*, 80.
- <sup>37</sup> Burgess, "The Pre-Reformation Records of All Saints': Part 1," 28.
- <sup>38</sup> Lawrence H. Officer and Samuel H. Williamson, "Five Ways to Compute the Relative Value of a UK Pound Amount, 1270 to Present," *MeasuringWorth*, accessed March 5, 2017, <https://www.measuringworth.com/m/calculators/ukcompare/relativevalue.php>.
- <sup>39</sup> Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, 134.
- <sup>40</sup> Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, 96.
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.
- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>45</sup> Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, 98.
- <sup>46</sup> Burgess, *The Pre-Reformation Records of All Saints': Part 3*, 98-99.
- <sup>47</sup> Kiril Petkov, *The Kiss of Peace: Ritual, Self, and Society in the High and Late Medieval West* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2003), 3.
- <sup>48</sup> Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, 125.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 126-127.
- <sup>50</sup> Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, 126-127.
- <sup>51</sup> Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, 126.
- <sup>52</sup> Burgess, *The Pre-Reformation Records of All Saints': Part 3*, 98.
- <sup>53</sup> Officer and Williamson, "Five Ways to Compute the Relative Value of a UK Pound Amount, 1270 to Present," *MeasuringWorth*, accessed March 7, 2017, <https://www.measuringworth.com/m/calculators/ukcompare/relativevalue.php>.
- <sup>54</sup> Burgess, *The Pre-Reformation Records of All Saints': Part 1*, 31.
- <sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.
- <sup>56</sup> Burgess, *The Pre-Reformation Records of All Saints': Part 3*, vi.

- <sup>57</sup> Carl Horstmann, *The Three Kings of Cologne: An Early English Translation of the "Historia Trium Regum by John of Hildesheim* (London: N. Trünber and Co., 1886), v.
- <sup>58</sup> Edward Tasker, *Encyclopedia of Medieval Church Art* (London: B.T. Batsford Ltd, 1993), 42-43.
- <sup>59</sup> Diana Webb, *Medieval European Pilgrimage c. 700-c. 1500* (Hampshire: Palgrave, 2002), 24.
- <sup>60</sup> Britannica Academic, "Rood Screen," *Encyclopedia Britannica* (2017), accessed 7 March 2017, <http://academic.eb.com.libproxy.temple.edu/levels/collegiate/article/rood-screen/83886>.
- <sup>61</sup> Margaret Aston, "The Use of Images," *Gothic: Art for England 1400-1547* (London, V&A Publications, 2003): 69.
- <sup>62</sup> Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, 91.
- <sup>63</sup> Ellen M. Ross, *The Grief of God: Images of the Suffering Jesus in Late Medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 20.
- <sup>64</sup> Burgess, *The Pre-Reformation Records of All Saints': Part 3*, 99.
- <sup>65</sup> Burgess, *The Pre-Reformation Records of All Saints': Part 3*, 95.
- <sup>66</sup> Burgess, "Through the looking-glass," 125.
- <sup>67</sup> Atchley, "The Halleway Chantry," 83.
- <sup>68</sup> Otto Gombosi, "Machaut's Messe Notre Dame," *The Musical Quarterly* 26 (1950): 208.
- <sup>69</sup> Britannica Academic, "Requiem mass," *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (2016), accessed 2 April 2016, <http://academic.eb.com.libproxy.temple.edu/EBchecked/topic/498939/requiem-mass>.
- <sup>70</sup> Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, 91.
- <sup>71</sup> Chester, Robert, *Genealogical Memoirs of the Families of Chester of Bristol* (London: Reeves and Turner, 1881), 2, 4.
- <sup>72</sup> Burgess, *The Pre-Reformation Records of All Saints': Part 1*, 15.
- <sup>73</sup> Burgess, *The Pre-Reformation Records of All Saints': Part 1*, 15-17.
- <sup>74</sup> Duffy, *Late Medieval Religion*, 56-57.
- <sup>75</sup> Burgess, *The Pre-Reformation Records of All Saints': Part 1*, 17.
- <sup>76</sup> Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, 331.
- <sup>77</sup> Burgess, *The Pre-Reformation Records of All Saints': Part 1*, 17.
- <sup>78</sup> Britannica Academic, "Rood Screen," *Encyclopedia Britannica* (2017), accessed 6 March 2017, <http://academic.eb.com.libproxy.temple.edu/levels/collegiate/article/rood-screen/83886>.
- <sup>79</sup> Burgess, *The Pre-Reformation Records of All Saints': Part 3*, i.
- <sup>80</sup> Burgess, *The Pre-Reformation Records of All Saints': Part 1*: 16.
- <sup>81</sup> Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, 159.
- <sup>82</sup> Burgess, *The Pre-Reformation Records of All Saints': Part 1*, 15-16.
- <sup>83</sup> Sharon E. J. Gerstel, "Painted Sources for Female Piety in Medieval Byzantium," *DOP* 52 (1998) 89-111.
- <sup>84</sup> Peter Loewen and Robin Waugh, ed., *Mary Magdalene in Medieval Culture: Conflicted Roles* (New York: Routledge, 2004), i.
- <sup>85</sup> Tasker, *Encyclopedia of Medieval Church Art*, 133.
- <sup>86</sup> The National Gallery, "Saint Giles and the Deer," *The National Gallery* (2017), accessed 6 March 2017, <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/master-of-saint-giles-saint-giles-and-the-deer>.
- <sup>87</sup> Tasker, *Encyclopedia of Medieval Church Art*, 129.
- <sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.
- <sup>89</sup> Duffy, *Late Medieval Religion*, 56.
- <sup>90</sup> Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, 159.
- <sup>91</sup> Burgess, *The Pre-Reformation Records of All Saints': Part 1*, 16.
- <sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 16-17.
- <sup>93</sup> Aymer Vallance, *English Church Screens* (Edinburgh: B.T. Batsford, Ltd., 1936), plate 220.
- <sup>94</sup> Jonathan Wooding and Nigel Yates, ed., *A Guide to the Chapels and Churches of Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011), 30.

<sup>95</sup> Tasker, *Encyclopedia of Medieval Church Art*, 118.

<sup>96</sup> Binski, "English Parish Churches," 1.

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