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Saving the Souls of Medieval London. Perpetual Chantries at St. Paul's Cathedral, c.1200-1548

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Cindy Wood

Marie-Hélène Rousseau has written this book on the perpetual chantries of the old St. Paul's Cathedral based on the rich archive in the Guildhall Library, London, in conjunction with other sources. The author has provided a concise and clear introduction to the subject of chantries alongside a very detailed and comprehensive account of this feature of the life of the cathedral. These medieval religious foundations have received relatively little attention in academic studies since the publishing of the seminal work of Kathleen Wood-Legh in 1965 (1), and this author acknowledges the debt to Wood-Legh, along with other later works, in her introduction. Chantries and chantry chapels had a relatively short history; emerging in the late 12th and early 13th centuries as separate foundations; especially in St. Paul's, and subsequently disappearing after the second Chantry Act of 1547. The fact that in this short space of time approximately 84 in were founded this particular church is remarkable and the book treats this rich history with skill and insight.

The book is laid out in six chapters. After a general introduction about chantry foundations, the themes of these chapters are clearly defined: chantry founding; management; housing/location; monitoring of chantry clerics; how they were served and finally their dissolution, followed by a conclusion.

Chapter one deals clearly and concisely with the foundation of the many chantries in St. Paul's, many being early foundations from the last quarter of the twelfth century, contemporary to others founded in Paris, Amiens and Lichfield. This church was home to a high number of clerical chantry foundations, including those founded by the unique minor canons of St. Paul's. This makes comparison with other English secular cathedrals problematic, but is very useful in the discussion about the wide range of clerics able to found chantries in this church. Many of the early chantries were included in the reorganisation under Bishop Braybrooke in 1371, after the Black Death, when many of these foundations were found to be insufficiently endowed to survive the economic conditions of this period. The Dean and Chapter learnt from this experience and thereafter restricted the foundation of chantries to those with greater means. This chapter also charts the experience of the lay population of London in regard to chantry foundation in the cathedral. Here the author's research reveals how the laity acted as executors for the foundation of clerical chantries (including women acting in this capacity) or as later donors to older chantries, whose financial position was precarious, rather than founding many chantries in their own name. Although there were no separate lay foundations after 1408 (that of Beatrice de Roos), the book does reveal the close relationship between both clerics and laity in London, and is the value of the close examination of a single church. This chapter does highlight clearly and with good examples, the complexity of chantry foundations in their many guises, in addition to their financial benefit to the Dean and Chapter in the later medieval period, providing approximately 20 per cent of their income by the time of the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* in the early 1530s.

Chapter two discusses the management of the chantries in St. Paul's and their personnel. There is considerable documentary evidence for this aspect of religious life and the author has made good use of these sources. Although chantries all had the common requirement to perform a daily mass for the soul of the founder/founders, beyond this commonality there were many avenues for personalisation. In this chapter the highly individual aspects of chantry foundations is clearly made. In St. Paul's all chantry priests were under the control of the Dean and Chapter, but other aspects of their lives, such as appointment; salary; type of foundation; liturgy and even vestments, were at the behest of their founders. The changes in these areas over the period under study are also well made. The Black Death is clearly a watershed, and defined two different periods of chantry foundation. More were founded before this event, mostly of single priests and often with small endowments. After 1350 there were fewer founded, but these had larger endowments, often resulting in chantries of several priests, for example, John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster (d.1399), whose chantry was manned by two chaplains and that of Roger Holme, one-time mayor of London, (c.1390), who endowed a chantry of seven priests (p. 43).

Chapter two also provides an insight into the chosen liturgy of some chantry founders. This aspect of chantry life is rarely available or discussed in other studies and the information from the St. Paul's sources is welcomed. It might be preferred that the arrangements of Roger Holme's chantry (c.1390) were discussed within the context of the liturgy of the whole cathedral, rather than as a separate discussion, although this is a minor point. It is interesting, and worth noting, that the prevailing liturgy of the mother house was the Use of St. Paul's until 1414, before the adoption of the Use of Sarum. This provides a context in which any chantry deviations can be seen to highlight liturgical personalisation. The evidence for founders at St. Paul's to proscribe certain masses at different times of the week is significant, especially as it reveals the lack of support for the fashionable masses of the later 15th century, such as 'Name of Jesus' or 'Five Wounds of Christ.'

This chapter continues to discuss chantry administration. The means of endowment were often complicated to ensure an uninterrupted flow of prayers for the soul of a founder. The variety of efforts made by the founders to ensure this continual round of intercession are amply demonstrated in this single church and are comprehensively covered by the author. From quit-rents with other religious houses, to straightforward endowment of property or gifts of money, the chantry founders of St. Paul's employed many devices with inbuilt strategies to avoid cessation of funding for their chantry priests. The intricate planning of several layers of supervision indicates the importance placed by founders of this continual offering of prayers. The archive of St. Paul's has been used carefully to demonstrate this variety and its changes over the period covered, from the simple instructions for the chantry priest of the earlier period, to the apogee of

incorporated chantries in the first half of the 15th century, (Thomas More, d.1424, and Walter Sherrington, d.1447), to the less weighty managerial responsibilities of the chantry priest in the early 16th century, (Richard Fitzjames, Bishop of London, d.1522). The discussion of obits and their part within the life of the church is also a valuable discussion of an area that has been rarely studied. The conclusion of this chapter, which also includes brief notes on education and library duties of chantry chaplains, reinforces the individuality of the founding and managing of the numerous chantries within St. Paul's.

Chapter three is an analysis of the siting of the chantries and chantry chapels within the cathedral church, as well as the housing of the priests themselves. Within the church the 84 chantries necessitated the erection and use of many altars from the late 12th century, not all contained within their own chapel space. Sadly neither the church nor any monuments or chapels survived the Great Fire of London in 1666 and therefore many possible locations are now problematic. Careful analysis of the documents has allowed the author to locate many of these, but sadly this is not included figuratively. This chapter includes information on the charnel house of St. Paul's, which contained many chantries after its construction in twelfth century, including one dedicated to the mayors and bishops of London, the Dean and Chapter and all Londoners (p. 75). This is styled as a 'communal' chantry, and its later re-endowments after 1350 illustrates its continual importance to Londoners at this time (p. 76).

The issue of housing the numerous chantry chaplains in St. Paul's is also dealt with in this chapter. The increasing number of these personnel placed the Dean and Chapter under pressure from early in the 14th century. It was seen as desirable to house these priests within the precinct of the cathedral, rather at lodgings in the city itself. Thus from 1315 chantry chaplains were allocated space in the precinct, referred to as the close of the chaplains in 1366, and the 'Prestehous' by 1391 (p. 80). Under Bishop Braybrooke's reorganisation of the chantries in 1391, he required all chantry priests who were not otherwise members of a college, to reside in a building to the west of the precinct. The chaplains who served at the two chantry colleges within the cathedral, Holmes's College, and that of John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, founded 1386 and 1403 respectively, were provided with their own communal lodgings.

The disciplining and monitoring of the chantry priests is dealt with in chapter four. Vacancies were dealt with seriously by patrons, including the Dean and Chapter, bishops of London and the mayor and corporations of London, who all appear to have taken their roles and responsibilities very seriously. Chantries were not ignored and while a vacancy may have been managed, for example, where the income was used for periods to improve endowed properties (p. 96), generally these were brief. Chantry priests were monitored for attendance and their performance in the choir. In terms of their general conduct, the chantry priests at St. Paul's did not appear to have greatly troubled the Dean and Chapter. Whilst examples of poor conduct are included here, generally the evidence suggests that St. Paul's, unlike Lichfield Cathedral, did not have a serious problem with clerical misbehaviour.

The fifth chapter discusses how the chantries were served by their priests; their place of origin; length of service and educational history. This is always difficult to achieve as records are not complete, but the individual cases have provided anecdotal evidence. The issue of pluralism by chantry priests, especially those at St. Paul's Cathedral, has been the subject of much comment, including contemporary writers such as Piers the Plowman and Geoffrey Chaucer.⁽²⁾ The author does address this issue and comes to the same conclusion as Wood-Legh, that is, while some chantry priests were pluralists this was not endemic.

The investigation in this chapter, even with the problems of documentary survival, does make the point clearly that the position of chantry priest was not always a starting point in a clerical career, nor was it one which was necessarily of low status. Examples are given of chantry priests who entered St. Paul's after resigning rectories, those chantries which appear to be a retirement appointment (the chantry of Bishop William de Ste-Mere Eglise (p. 120)) or those personnel who moved between chantries within an apparent hierarchical structure. The movement of staff within the chantries of St. Paul's illustrates the variety and complexity of appointments, although this church did have an exceptional number. The excellent use of the surviving documents can reveal that chantry priest appointment was a reflection of many different aspects, and was closely linked to, the wishes of the founders as well as external pressures.

The 80 known wills of chantry priests have been analysed by the author. This is an exceptional survival rate and as a resource has been used well to illustrate an area of personalisation not available in other chantry studies. These documents reveal the wishes of the priests in terms of burial requests that can be used to highlight any changes in the pre- and post-Black Death period. The evidence suggests that in the later period priests preferred burial within the cathedral rather than the precinct. The wills also serve to illustrate the bond between many priests and Londoners. St. Paul's was a secular house, not a monastery, and therefore their staff were free to move about the city after their religious duties, and many were from London and its environs, as demonstrated in chapter five (p. 111). There were bequests to individual Londoners as well as corporations, and these suggest that many, but not all, had disposable incomes and were relatively affluent (p. 143). This chapter reveals clearly, by the use of examples, the variety of both the careers of chantry priests in the capital as well as the complexity of their relationships both within the cathedral and the world outside the precinct of St. Paul's.

The final chapter deals with the dissolution of the chantries and chantry chapels. This dissolution was finally achieved in 1548, following the Second Chantry Act of 1547, which not only claimed their endowments but was also an assault on the fundamental beliefs that underpinned these intercessionary foundations. The first chantry act of 1545, under Henry VIII, was negated by the king's death and appeared to be more interested in their wealth to help fund the king's war with France. The author charts the process of dissolution over a longer period, from the Lollards, to Martin Luther and onto the reigns of Henry VIII and Edward VI. She has used many different sources for this period, including the chantry certificates, and the wills of some chantry priests in the 1530s and 1540s, which reveal their conservative views on religion, as might be expected. The transfer of the lands that belonged to the chantry chapels has also been tracked from 1548 to 1572. These later transactions reveal, in common with Exeter and Salisbury Cathedrals, that the Dean and Chapter were able to keep some of the chantry lands in return for an annual payment or pension to the Crown. There were also a number of chantries that were linked to prebends in the cathedral whose assets were not seized (p. 152). These aspects of chantry dissolution are not often revealed by studies, which tend to look back at foundation rather than forwards at the dissolution to identify patterns in land transactions. The fact that chantries were still being founded and new incumbents being accepted up to 1547 is also a point not covered in many chantry studies, and is well made by the author.

The fate of the chantry priests is not analysed, but evidence is given for many, including those who received their pension until death or others who gained other preferments. The Marian revival of Roman Catholic practices did not see a revival of chantry activity in the cathedral, and their physical presence was swept away with the rest of the cathedral in the Great Fire of London in 1666, leaving only the documentary sources used in this book to reveal their existence.

In conclusion this is a very important book in terms of chantry studies and is a worthy successor to the seminal work of Wood-Legh. It has brought to life the large and various documentary sources for the chantries, especially the archive held at the Guildhall Library. At times it relies more on the narratives of individuals rather than analysis of data, but this does not make it less interesting or valuable. The illustrations are few and are not particularly useful or linked to the text, and a map locating altars and chapels would have been very useful and informative. Nevertheless this is an excellent account of the chantries of St. Paul's Cathedral which is contextual where possible. This book is a work long overdue and

Marie- Hélène's superb research has revealed the complexity and variety of chantry functions in an important church in a clear and well-written account.

Notes

1. K. Wood-Legh, *Perpetual Chantries in Britain* (Cambridge, 1965).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Wood-Legh, *Perpetual Chantries*, p. 190.[Back to \(2\)](#)

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