

Teachers' notes:
3. Parish churches and the changes that were made to them
during the Tudor period

Parish churches are perhaps one of the most distinctive and familiar features of the landscape today. Many churches date back to the medieval period when England was a Roman Catholic country and religion was an intrinsic part of everyday life. However, they have undergone numerous alterations during their existence, and the buildings as we see them today are very different to how they would have appeared in the medieval period. Some of the greatest changes to churches came after the Reformation when Henry VIII severed all ties with Rome, created the new Church of England, closed all the monasteries and confiscated much of their wealth. Henry himself did not make many immediate changes to the physical fabric and fittings of parish churches but there were rapid fluctuations in royal policy during the reigns of his successors, the protestant Edward VI (1547-1553) and the catholic Mary I (1553-1558), during which many 'Popish' furnishings were removed and then reinstated. However, when Elizabeth I came to the throne in 1558 Protestantism was permanently re-established and churches were ordered to finally obliterate the old religion from their interiors.

In the late medieval period the interiors of churches were full of colour, images and lights. We know this from surviving documents of the period, some of the most descriptive of which are connected with Holy Trinity church in Long Melford, Suffolk. The account by Roger Martin (c.1527-1615) entitled *The State of Long Melford Church and Our Ladie's Chappel at the East End, as I did know it* was written in the 1580s or 90s, but in it he remembers the church as it was in his youth. He tells of the great high altar with the Crucifixion at its centre and with scenes from the Passion of Christ, with 'very fair painted boards which were opened upon high and solemn feast dayes, which then was a very beautiful shew'. Near the altar were also statues of saints and a 'fair large gilt image of the Holy Trinity...besides other fair images'. The roof of the church was 'beautified with fair gilt stars' and there were also 'many rich copes' (robes worn by the priest). A 'List of church goods' of the same church drawn up in 1529 (a few years before the Reformation) details its large collection of holy vessels including chalices, incense boats and censers, candlesticks, holy water sprinklers, jewels and rings, priests' vestments, altar cloths, mass books, chests and crosses.

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Medieval churches varied in size and wealth and Long Melford was probably one of the wealthier ones, but elements of its furnishings and fittings could be found in every late medieval parish church. The parish church was the focus of great community pride and people invested heavily in its fabric and furnishings. The chancel was the responsibility of the rector while the congregation took responsibility for the rest of the church.

At the Reformation and over the course of the following two decades Roman Catholicism was supplanted by the new religion and the interiors of churches were transformed to accommodate it.

Wall paintings: Before the Reformation the walls of churches were covered with painted designs and pictures of religious scenes. Because people couldn't read, and because church services were spoken in Latin, the paintings told the stories that were part of the services. The Doom was perhaps one of the most vividly descriptive of the church paintings as it warned people what would happen to them if they did not lead good lives. At this time the belief in life after death and in the existence of heaven and hell was a central part of medieval religion. The Doom paintings, which were painted over the chancel arch, showed scenes of good people being helped up to heaven by angels while bad people were being forced down to hell by devils where terrible things happened to them. All wall paintings in churches, including doom paintings, were whitewashed over after the Reformation, although some have now been rediscovered. In Lincolnshire medieval wall paintings can be seen, for example, at the churches at Corby Glen and at Pickworth.

Painted glass: Medieval church windows were filled with coloured glass. As with wall paintings, the images in the glass were a way of communicating religion to a largely illiterate population. After the Reformation most painted glass was destroyed and replaced with clear glass, although fragments still survive in some churches. As with wall paintings, Corby Glen and Pickworth have some of the best parish church instances of medieval glass in the county, although Lincoln cathedral has the most splendid examples.

The chancel: The chancel is the area at the east end of the church where the altar is situated. It is separate from the nave which is the main body of the church where the congregation sits or stands. Before the Reformation the chancel had furnishings and fittings that have now mostly disappeared. There were built-in seats for priests (sedilia), an Easter sepulchre, which was a symbolic representation of Jesus's tomb and an important part of the Easter church service, and special basins for washing communion vessels (piscinas). Occasionally these chancel fittings still survive, as at the churches at Heckington and Navenby.

Rood screen and loft: Before the Reformation the nave and chancel were separated by a screen so that the congregation in the nave could hardly see into

the chancel, which was the holiest part of the church, or witness the priest's special connection with God during the service. The screen was usually made of wood but sometimes it was of stone. Above the screen there was a wooden balcony called the rood loft which was reached by steps within the side wall. A choir sang or musicians played from here during services. The rood loft also supported the rood itself which was a painted statue of Jesus on the cross. After the Reformation nearly all screens, rood lofts and roods were destroyed and the focus of the church service moved away from the chancel to the pulpit, although some remnants can still be found. At the small church at Coates by Stow between Gainsborough and Lincoln the screen and loft are still in place and there are the remains of a painted rood on the wall above.

The altar: The altar stood at the east end of the chancel in pre-Reformation churches and was the focus of the church service. A reredos (a painted or sculpted screen) stood behind and/or above it, like the 'very fair painted boards' at long Melford. The altar supported a crucifix (a representation of Jesus on the cross), and the front of it was covered by a frontal (usually a decorated cloth). Apart from the main altar in the chancel many churches also had side altars either in partitioned off areas of the aisles or in separate side chapels. Lights burned at the altars and people often formed themselves into groups called guilds to take responsibility for maintaining these. After the Reformation the side altars were removed and the main altar was replaced by a simple communion table, often cloth-covered but without any of the imagery of the medieval period and placed further towards the nave end of the chancel.

Pulpit: Before the Reformation church services were in Latin and mostly took place in the chancel and separate from the congregation. After the changes of the mid-Tudor period the priest conducted the service from the pulpit at the front of the nave and preached directly to the people in English. The pulpit was therefore a new addition to the church at this time. At the same time, seating arrangements in churches changed. Before the Reformation seating had been reserved for the wealthy and for members of the ordinary congregation who were infirm. With the emphasis now on preaching it became necessary to provide seating for everybody and pews were gradually introduced into the naves and aisles of churches.

Tombs and memorials: Most people were buried outside in the churchyard and their graves were unmarked. Gravestones as we know them today did not begin to appear until the 17th century. Only the most important people were buried inside the church and their families were wealthy enough to ensure that they were commemorated with impressive memorials. During the medieval period the memorials were either brass plates set into the floor or chest tombs made of stone. The brasses frequently had pictures of the people who were buried there inscribed on them and the stone tombs had carved effigies. The people were usually depicted dressed as knights in armour and their ladies. The Redford

family brasses at Broughton, near Brigg, and the Willoughby and Bertie family stone monuments at Spilsby are excellent Lincolnshire examples of these.

Just as there were changes in architectural fashions during the Tudor period, there were changes in the design of funerary monuments. Later in the 16th century monuments began to display Renaissance influences such as classical columns, balusters and canopies. The monument to Sir Thomas St. Pol and his wife Faith at Snarford (he died in 1582) is a good example. Thomas and Faith, both good Protestants, are holding their prayer books. They are attended by their 8 children, 4 of whom died in infancy. Their monument is in the chancel at Snarford church, its location reinforcing the new religion by occupying the space previously taken by the medieval stone altar which was removed at the Reformation.

Suggested further reading:

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