

CHANTRY CHAPELS OF SOUTHWELL MINSTER

By Jos Hall

The origin of chantries is in the medieval view of death, see Luke 16 22-23 - Dives in Hades (in inferno - Vulgate), Lazarus in Abraham's bosom. This is important for the medieval view of heaven and hell, death and judgment, happiness and misery.

Medieval man closer than us to nature and to death. How can we get close to what they thought? By looking at their iconography, especially scenes of the Last Judgment - very important in Western art, and found in altar pieces, books, paintings and especially carved tympana, e.g. Conques - an important staging post on the way to Compostela. Church of St. Foy has tympanum over the West Door dating from 1130. Also Autun - West door of same period, Vezelay, and many others, known as Dooms. Conques - Christ in Majesty, on right hand souls in paradise, on left hellmouth, below, dead rise from tombs, angels divide just from unjust, the latter are thrust down into hell, the former led to a row of figures seated in a colonnade. This shows the full story of after life as seen in the 12th century: not only the Last Judgment, but the intermediate period before that Day. The wicked go straight to hell, only saints go straight to heaven. The rest of the faithful have an intermediate period before the Day of the Lord. Among the seated figures is a venerable man with his arms around two souls: Abraham.

This figure of Abraham becomes more central, e.g. at Lincoln in the porch of the South Quire Aisle is a (much damaged) figure of Abraham with 3 souls in his lap, while angels bring him more. St Thomas Aquinas: "That rest which is given to me after death is called the bosom of Abraham". In later Middle Ages there was less certainty - what about souls neither very good nor very bad? Therefore more emphasis on doctrine of purgatory. This originated with St. Augustine (5th century) elaborated by St. Bernard (12th century) and given poetic expression by Dante (14th century). 1331 Pope John XXII said that not even saints went straight to heaven. 1336 Pope Benedict XII, his successor, contradicted this as saints in heaven intercede for sinners on earth.

This led to the doctrine of the Treasury of Merits (i.e. the merits of Christ and the Saints) whose resources could be drawn upon and administered by the Church authorities through Indulgences, the remission of the penance for sin in return for the carrying out of good works. These could be various, eg a pilgrimage, joining a crusade, building a church, etc, but often became the giving of money to a good cause or to a popular shrine. Could be on behalf of a loved one. This led to prayers for the dead in Purgatory being paid for and in many cases endowed. Founders of religious houses, hospitals etc and benefactors of churches and colleges expected prayers for their souls in return. Confraternities were established to ensure members' spiritual welfare ("Medieval fire insurance!"), e.g. Guild of the Holy Cross at Stratford on Avon, whose Guild Chapel has a "doom" over the chancel arch.

For smaller monies, obits - masses on anniversary of death (year's mind) for x years - for greater monies, in perpetuity. Wealthier patrons endowed a special priest for more frequent services, founding a chantry or trust for this purpose. Sometimes a canopied chapel was built round the tomb, e.g. Winchester - 6 Bishops, 1345-1555, each vying in splendour with the others.

All this ended at the Reformation - chantries dissolved, their revenues appropriated by the Crown. Tombs came more and more to commemorate the deceased's merits - e.g. 1560 Elizabeth I's proclamation against defacing monuments to prevent the "extinguishing of the honourable memory of sundry virtuous and noble persons deceased".

Chantries at Southwell

Chantries usually associated with specific altars, of which a large medieval church had many, with dedications altering according to fashion, therefore difficult to trace and locate.

At Southwell, nothing now left, much surrendered to Henry VIII, 1646 much destruction by parliamentary army. 1784 Booth chapel demolished. Ewan Christian got rid of anything remaining. BUT certificates of Chantry Commissioners 1546 and 1548 and Valor Ecclesiastic 1534-5 (often inaccurate) give some information about the 13 Southwell chantry.

1-3 Chantries at the Altar of St. Thomas of Canterbury. Founded by Robert of Lexington pre-1241, 2 Priests had income from Barnborough, 1 Priest from Newton and Bingham. One could have been in a chapel in the Burgage, not in the Minster, at first.

4. Chantry at Altar of St. Peter (within the Quire). Founded by Richard Sutton, canon and prebendary of N. Muskham 1242-1268. Chantry priest had cure of St. Denis, Morton. Possibly present Airmen's Chapel.

5. Chantry at altar of St. John the Evangelist. Founded by Henry of Nottingham, Canon 1241/2. Endowment from Gilbertine Priory at Six Hills. In North aisle of nave, west of North door, where today there is a tomb set in the wall.

6. Chantry at altar of St. Nicholas. Founded after 1242 by Sir Wm. Wydrington or Whittington, seneschal of Archbishop. Halam attached to this chantry.

7. Chantry at altar of St. Stephen. Founded after 1245 by Andrew, bailiff of Southwell. Adjacent to St. Nicholas in E. aisle of N. transept.

8. Vavasour chantry at altar of St. John the Baptist. Founded c.1275 by Henry Vavasour, prebendary of Norwell Palishall. Probably in south wall of nave, opposite St. John the Evangelist on North side.

9. Our Lady's Chantry. Founded by Wm. Gunthorpe 1395 with pension from Six Hills Priory. Probably behind High Altar. A will of 1475 describes it as "without the Quire", but could have been present St. Thomas' Chapel.

10. Haxey's Chantry. Founded 1424-5 by Thomas Haxey, prebendary of Rampton in the "morrowmass chapel", i.e. where first mass of the day was said. Endowed with lands at eckingham and Bale with Gainsborough and Bathley.

11 & 12 Booth Chantries. Founded by Lawrence Booth 1479. 1504 Will refers to 2 chantries in the chapel of St. John the Baptist at the altar of St. Cuthbert.

13. Chantry at Altar of St. Mary Magdalene

Founded by Robert Oxton, prebendary of Thockrington in Yorks in 1408. Nothing more known of this.

There is no documentary evidence that the cut-out portions on the capitals of some nave pillars were for the canopies of chantry chapels, but this is possible.

SUGGESTED LOCATIONS FOR SITES OF CHANTRY CHAPELS IN SOUTHWELL MINSTER

