The Material Manifestation of Secular Piety and the Impact of the Lincolnshire Rising of 1536

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In this article I intend to show how, in the late Middle Ages, all members of a community, both rich and poor, enthusiastically supported the maintenance, rebuilding or furnishing of their parish church. The reforms introduced by King Henry VIII which included the closure of those religious houses, which had clearly become redundant and the reform of the clergy together with the break with Rome were generally accepted. However, in a predominantly conservative county, 'enough was enough' and interference with religious traditions, customs and practices which more closely affected Lincolnshire people were unacceptable. The 'last straw' came with the rumoured closure of certain churches.

An examination of 1828 wills made by Lincolnshire testators between 1481 and 1536 discloses that an average of 58% made bequests to their parish churches in addition to the almost mandatory bequest for 'tithes forgotten' (82%). Those wills which contain bequests towards the maintenance of the church reveal much evidence for rebuilding or additions and for the provision of interior furnishing and decoration which can be dated to the later Middle Ages. Clearly, parishioners from all ranks of society were taking an enthusiastic part in parish administration and some were prepared to add aisles, towers or windows to their parish churches and to contribute or raise very considerable sums of money to pay for them.

Unfortunately, surviving records rarely show how the work was financed, and those that do are usually for work instigated by gentry and merchants whose tombs and chantry chapels are a feature of many parish churches. Although small contributions by individuals to church building campaigns were greatly encouraged, very few records have survived in Lincolnshire. However, the accounts of the Fabric Fund of Lincoln Cathedral provide much useful evidence. The Churchwardens’ Accounts for St James’s church, Louth and St Helen’s church, Leaveron also provide evidence which will be discussed below.

Fund raising took several forms. At Christmas, Easter and other festivals, parish feasts known as 'church ales' were held in the nave of the church. The ale was made in the parish brewhouse with malt that was usually given by parishioners. The feasting was followed by dancing in the church and the parishioners paid for the ale they drank. The profits provided a substantial sum for the church fabric fund. Money was also raised by collections and gifts both in money and in kind. Bequests were particularly important. The parish gilds in many cases were wealthy enough to enlarge or add aisles to parish churches in order to house their chapels. In a few cases gilds even rebuilt a church. Gilds enabled poorer members of a local community to contribute to the maintenance of their parish church through gild membership. As Dr Morris has pointed out ‘...the attitude of the rector, parochial morale and organisation...were factors which led to countless acts of humdrum maintenance’.

Most parishioners had a pride in, and commitment to, the maintenance and adornment of their church and the many bequests confirm this. Although Dr Morris states that 'in Lincolnshire the late medieval increase in the sheep population coincided with a decline in church building' the many bequests in support of building campaigns clearly disprove this statement and show that the enlargement and rebuilding of parish churches was still taking place in the county during this period.

Building campaigns often took many years to complete. The spire at Louth took fifteen years and at Leaveron the first stage in the rebuilding of the church seems to have commenced in 1492 and was completed in 1519. It is not surprising that testators sometimes asked that payment of their bequests should be conditional upon the work being carried out within a specified period, or should only be made when the work was finished. When James Washbyngborogh made a bequest for the repair and maintenance of the choir of his parish church of Wyborton, he specified that this was to be carried out within six years. Thomas Fettle asked that his bequest of 6s.8d. towards the rebuilding of Leake church should be paid 'at the third payments within three quarters of a year after my decease'. John Blanke of Mouton, when making a bequest towards the building of a new rood loft, stated that half of his bequest of 6s.8d. was to be paid 'at the beginning and 3s.4d. when it is paid a nede of'.

Few records have survived in Lincolnshire for the building of churches, or additions to them, paid for entirely by an individual. An inscription on the east wall of the porch of Addlethorpe church suggests that it was given by John Godard (Fig.1):

Jesus Crist that suffered
Grete parys and hard
Hafe mercy of the sawle
Of Jhon Godard
That thys porche made
And meny othyer thynges depe
Ther for Jesus Crist
Quyote hym helye mede.

The arms of Anthony Ellis, a merchant of the Staple of Calais, are visible upon the massive tower that he paid for at Great Ponton in 1519. It is said that Ellis sent a cask to his wife labelled 'Calais Sand' which he opened on his return home showing that it contained the greater part of the money which he used to build the tower. Carved on the tower are Ellis's arms and the inscription 'Thinke and Thanke God of al'. At Grantham in about 1495 Thomas Hall, a wealthy merchant, built a chantry chapel attached to the Corpus Christi aisle.

The most important and extensive support for church building by individuals in late medieval Lincolnshire was that undertaken by the Browne family of Stamford. They were wealthy wool merchants and the considerable rebuilding of All Saints’ Church, which took place in the late fifteenth
century was a joint undertaking by two brothers: John, who died in 1475, and William, who died in 1489. William was also responsible for the building of the magnificent hospital which was completed in 1475.10

The will of William Browne made in 1488 includes a number of bequests to All Saints’ Church for vestments and the will of his wife Margaret, made in the following year, as well as a bequest for ‘a palle for the fertour [shrine]’ and embroidered cushions for All Saints’ Church, includes bequests for vestments and palls for seven other churches in Stamford.11 Such munificence by wealthy individuals was, of course, welcome but as an expression of secular piety the building campaigns which enabled all levels of the local community to show their support for their own church are a far more revealing indication of the strength of parish life. This is adequately demonstrated by the Churchwardens’ Accounts for St James’s church, Louth. The magnificent spire of this church is the most outstanding example of church building in Lincolnshire during the late Middle Ages. The campaign was the culmination of a long programme of enlargement of the original thirteenth-century foundation, commencing with a new chancel and working towards a new tower.12

The total cost of building the spire recorded in the Churchwardens’ Accounts for 1515 is given as £305 8s.5d.13 Dr J. Swaby, sometime Vicar of St James’s church, Louth, summarised the sources of the money. Firstly, the Sunday collections in church, which averaged about 4s. a week over the period. Secondly, money received for burials in the church. It used to cost 3s.4d. for burial in the porch and 6s.8d. for burial in the body of the church. Between 1500 and 1521 there were about two hundred such burials. Thirdly, money received for ringing the great bell either as a passing bell or as a commemoration of the departed. The fee varied between 8d. and 1s.8d.

The first charge on these three items was ordinary church expenditure and only the surplus was available for the spire. Goulding reckons the surplus was about £178 6s.5d. To this surplus should be added gifts to the value of £53 3s. and loans of £73 19s.14 A further valuable contribution were ‘boon’ wages which were given for the carriage of stone and other items paid for by local tradesmen.15

There was considerable enthusiasm in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century for the rebuilding or extension of the churches at Leverton, Leake and Benington which are in the marshland area to the north of Boston.

The progress of the rebuilding of St Helen’s church, Leverton which took place over a period commencing in about 1492 and continued until about 1534, can be traced from the Churchwardens’ Accounts and wills.16 Stylistic evidence shows that the chancel and tower are Perpendicular and the Churchwardens’ Accounts record bequests for ‘emending of the canopie’ in 1492, 1495 and 1498. Payments are also recorded for the reconstituting and rehanging of the bells which is further evidence for the rebuilding of the tower at this time.17 In 1517 there is a payment of 2s.2d. ‘for shoryng of ye north side of ye kyre’ and in 1519 there is a payment of 4s. ‘for halloying of the kyre’.18 The north aisle is late Perpendicular in style and it would appear that substantial building work took place in the period 1492 to 1519.19 In 1527 the buttresses of the church were ‘mended’ and in 1528 a payment of 3d. was made ‘to a masyn prentys for wallyng of ye window behind Saint thous ault’.20 Presumably a window over an altar dedicated to Saint Thomas was to be blocked up. Perhaps a new buttress had been built at this point to support the church wall. There is a mysterious payment in 1521 of a 1d. ‘for ale when ye first stone was lade’, and, although there is no definite statement of the work undertaken, perhaps this refers to the chancel.21 A will made in 1528 instructs that a sum of 6s.8d. was not to be paid until 1532 which suggests that the testator wished to contribute to a building proposal but only on its completion.22 In the following year the residue of an estate was to be used for the ‘church work’ and in 1530 a bequest of 3s.4d. was made to the ‘reparations’.23 In 1533 3s.4d. was left ‘for the building of the kyre’ and in the following year 4d. was bequeathed for ‘reparations’.24

The neighbouring church of St Mary at Leake was also considerably rebuilt at this time. The tower was commenced in 1490 but not completed until 1547. Over the fifty-seven years a total of £359 14s.10d. was raised to pay for this work.25 Bequests in support are recorded in 1521 and 1530 and were also made for the ‘repair and building of the church’ in 1532 and 1533. At Leverton and Leake it would appear that the original intention was to build both towers much higher.

At Benington-in-Holland, which is adjacent to both Leverton and Leake, a bequest was made towards the building of the new tower in 1530 and for ‘repairs’ in 1530, 1533 and 1534.26 It seems clear that there was much enthusiastic support and commitment for enlarging these three churches in the late Middle Ages.

The church of St Wilfrid, Alford, has a late Perpendicular tower which can be dated from bequests in wills made in 1529, 1530 and 1533.27 In the neighbouring village of Bilshy a will made on 12 April 1530 includes a bequest in support of the building of the church and another made nineteen days later includes a bequest towards the ‘making of the steeple’, which suggests a complete rebuilding.28 This church was subject to a Georgian rebuilding and Victorian ‘restoration’ but there is sufficient evidence to show that much of the church is Perpendicular.29 At Burgh-le-Marsh, five wills made between 1525 and 1530 contain bequests for ‘repurcations’ and William Pynkere in his will made on 17 September 1534 asks for the residue of his estate to be given ‘to finish the new quere’.30 In the following year, 1535, Thomas Temper provided for the ‘painting of the new choir in silver and gilt’.31 At Spilsby Alice Arnold, in her will made in 1529, left 3s.4d. towards the ‘bylding of the steeple’ and 3s.4d. ‘to the west window’; in addition Robert Goodricke left ‘half a hundredweight of old
metal towards the bells'. The bell-openings in the tower at Spilsby are certainly late Perpendicular and it would appear that the top stage of the tower was altered perhaps because of the augmentation of the bells. A similar example is St Swithin's church, Leadham where seven walls, made between 1527 and 1535, contain bequests for the maintenance, 'upholpding and reparacion' of the bells. The spire is Perpendicular and the tower has a Perpendicular window, which suggests that a Decorated tower was altered to take additional bells and then topped with a new spire.

There seems to have been very extensive rebuilding of Sutterton parish church in the late fifteenth century. This culminated with the reconsecration of the church for which the bishop was paid five marks. The Churchwardens purchased provisions for a parish feast to celebrate the event which included a swan, beef, mutton, lamb, chickens, two pigs, butter, eggs, spice, bread, wine and beer. Unfortunately this seems to be the only record of the rebuilding.

When a major scheme of rebuilding or repair had been completed, parishioners continued to express their piety by contributing to or paying for the beautification, ornamentation or furnishing of their parish church. Of course vestments, altar cloths and other such items needed periodic replacing or repair. Vestments and altar furnishings were frequently the subject of testamentary bequests. At Gonerby in 1534 Robert Tyllyng bequeathed £10 to buy a vestment and at Holbeach in the same year John Lesse also left £10 to buy a blue cope of velvet on which his name was to be embroidered that ‘I may be remembered in the year afterward’. Other bequests are made either for complete sets of vestments or for contributions to their cost. There are many bequests for the ‘repair’ of an altar and the most likely explanation of this term seems to be that the testator was making a contribution to the cost of replacing the altar furnishings. Frontals were changed according to the church calendar and a considerable number of frontals would be required for each of the many altars which were a feature of the medieval parish church.

Books were also subject to wear and tear and needed periodic replacement. At Castle Carlton, William Edglington made provision for new books to be bought for use by the priest and at Croft a new mass book was to be provided by the executors of John Longe.

Ornaments and items such as chalices were frequently the subject of bequests. Agnes Grosewell in her will made in 1488 asked for ‘iii platers, iii dishes and iii sawcers of pewter’ to be provided for the Corpus Christi chapel in St Botolph's church, Boston. At Algarkirk in 1510 William Bystill left 20s. towards the provision of pews and these were also the subject of a bequest of £4 by Thomas Kirkham of Hogsthope. Organs were provided for Fleet and Marshchapel parish churches in 1529 and 1530. The medieval organ consisted of a chest to which were attached one or more pairs of bellows and a number of wind pipes. The gilding and painting of screens and images was also the subject of a number of bequests. The bequest of 3s.3d. by Thomas Alysby of Donington-on-Bain for the painting of St Andrew probably refers to a wall painting, although this is not made clear.

Pious parishioners were not only able to contribute to church building campaigns but could express their piety in many other ways. The poorest person could contribute his ‘mite’ to an appeal for funds to purchase a necessary item. The more affluent could arrange for the purchase of, for example, a new chalice or service book on which the donor’s name would be written or engraved and the donor would also have the advantage of being remembered in the parish register. Donations and small bequests were sufficient for the funding of minor works but larger projects which ran for many years required a sustained effort. All this evidence leaves little doubt that, contrary to the opinion expressed by Dr Morris, in Lincolnshire, church building, maintenance, ornamentation and furnishing continued despite the difficulties which faced parishioners.

As early as 1525, during the protracted negotiations with the Pope which the King hoped would lead to a divorce from Queen Catherine, a Lincolnshire testator provided for an obit ‘so long as the law of England will suffer it’ and there are several similar provisions from that time onwards. This suggests that some testators were becoming concerned and anticipating the effect on established religious practices that Henry VIII’s problems with his divorce might have. Following the authorization of the dissolution of the smaller monasteries in March 1536, it was rumoured that chalices were to be taken from parish churches and that only one church was to be left within a radius of six or seven miles. There is evidence that these rumours were spread by Peter Effard who was the registrar for Dr John Pryn the commissary who had been provost wills from 23 to 28 September 1536 at Alford, Belchford, Caistor, Grimsby, Spilsby and Wrangle. Significantly each of these places was represented in the early days of the Lincolnshire Rising, which erupted only four days later. Effard had been mayor of Lincoln and, in addition to his duties as registrar, was chapter clerk. He was also a notary public and a well respected member of the community of some standing. It is not surprising that rumours from such a source were believed. As chapter clerk, Effard would be well aware of the discussions which took place amongst the Cathedral hierarchy. It may be that the rumours he had spread as he progressed around the country were in fact worries that had been expressed by the Cathedral Chapter. The rumoured closure of churches which, as has been shown, were the centre of village life and strongly supported by parishioners, must have been a particular cause of concern and distress to the rebels most of whom came from small and isolated communities (see Fig.3).
In the Louthske Deanery, centred on Louth, 38% of the seventy-three parishes had between one and nine households. In the Horncastle Deanery, 40% of the fifteen parishes had between ten and nineteen households. In the Hill Deanery, which was being visited jointly with the Horncastle Deanery at Bolingbroke, 65% of the nineteen parishes came within the category of ten to nineteen households. Only Yarborough and Bolingbroke Deaneries disclose significantly larger populated communities. Figure 3 confirms that the two centres of the Lincolnshire Rising, Louth and Horncastle, were also centres of small communities which would be at risk if the rumoured church closures were to materialise.64

The inhabitants of the isolated Wold villages of present day Lincolnshire know only too well that it is these churches that have been the first to be declared redundant. In medieval Lincolnshire rumours that some of these churches were to be closed must have been very distressing.

As has been shown, there was very considerable support and enthusiasm for the building, maintenance, ornamentation and furnishing of Lincolnshire parish churches and it is significant that the Rising first erupted in Louth, where the extensive rebuilding of St James’s church had been completed only some twenty years earlier. There would appear to be a definite relationship between building work carried out on parish churches and the Lincolnshire Rising.65

Several of the parish churches in communities from which the rebels came had recently been enlarged or had been the subject of building work. The work at Louth has already been discussed and there can be little doubt that the pride which local people had in their church was a major reason for Louth being at the centre of the Rising. But the work which had been taking place at many other churches involved in the Rising should not be overlooked. The tower of St Wilfrid’s church, Alford had been built within five or six years of the Rising and a new porch appears to have been built at the same time.66 At Spilsby, the tower had also been built within a short period of the Rising.67 At Horncastle the north and south chapels were probably added a few years before the Rising and there is evidence of other work of this period but the exact date is not clear.68 At Bilby, the seat of Sir Andrew Billesby who was prominent in the Rising, work had been carried out on the tower, chancel and north arcade within the previous five years.69

Three days, after the rising was officially over it was reported that Leonard Bawdres, Hugh Sleaforde, William Hudson and one Smythe had raised the inhabitants of Leake, Leerton and Wrangle by ringing the bells ‘backwards’. Although the men from the Boston area were slow to make their feelings known it is significant that considerable recent building work had been carried out at Leake and Leerton and other parishes near Boston.70

It is not surprising that the commons supported the Rising in large numbers. Even if a church was not to close, the possible replacement of the local priest with a ‘foreign’ monk from a dissolved religious house however “learned” must have been abhorrent. Many of the minor clergy who served the small communities of the Wolds were local men with experience of local problems.71

As Dr Bowker has said:

The immediate cause of the Lincolnshire Rising there can be little doubt, [was that] too much innovatory action was taking place in so small an area that, on 2 October 1536, it might well have seemed that the relentless efficiency of the Henrician state was being concentrated upon a mere ten square miles.72

Appendix

Summary of church building, enlargement or major repair which is known to have taken place from c.1480 to c.1536, prior to the outbreak of the Lincolnshire Rising.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parish Church</th>
<th>Earliest Wills</th>
<th>Latest Wills</th>
<th>Pevsner Type of work. page nos</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alford</td>
<td>1529</td>
<td>1533</td>
<td>p.93 Tower, porch.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Algarkirk</td>
<td>1510</td>
<td></td>
<td>p.95 Pews, clerestory.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashby Puerorum</td>
<td>1536</td>
<td></td>
<td>p.106 Tower.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bennington</td>
<td>1530</td>
<td>1534</td>
<td>p.141 Tower, clerestory.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bilby</td>
<td>1530</td>
<td></td>
<td>p.146 Tower, chancel, north arcade.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boston</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td>p.56 Tower started 1425 'completed after 1515'.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burgh-le-Marsh</td>
<td>1529</td>
<td>1535</td>
<td>pp.195-96 Choir, chancel.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great Ponton</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td>p.57 Tower (1519).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hogsthorpe</td>
<td>1510</td>
<td></td>
<td>p.383 Top stage tower, choir, south porch.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Howsham</td>
<td>1530</td>
<td></td>
<td>- Rebuilding, repair of chapel.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadenham</td>
<td>1527</td>
<td>1535</td>
<td>p.429 Bells, bell openings in tower, spire.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leake</td>
<td>1521</td>
<td>1530</td>
<td>pp.593-94 Tower (1490-1547), north aisle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leverton</td>
<td>1528</td>
<td>1533</td>
<td>pp.434-35 Extensive rebuilding (c.1492-c.1534), tower (1498-1503).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louth</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td>p.538 Spire (1500-1515).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Willingham</td>
<td>1532</td>
<td></td>
<td>p.669 Tower.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Witham</td>
<td>1529</td>
<td></td>
<td>p.669 Tower.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spilsby</td>
<td>1529</td>
<td></td>
<td>p.679 Tower.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sutterton</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td>- Church reconsecrated 1493.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theddlethorpe</td>
<td>1529</td>
<td>1535</td>
<td>p.755 Tower.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

St Helen
Notes
3. Ibid., pp.328 and 357.
4. Ibid., p.356.
5. Lincoln Wills Registered in the District Probate Registry at Lincoln, Volume II, AD 1505 to May 1539, edited by C. W. Foster, Lincoln Record Society, 10 (Horncastle, 1918), p.17 (hereafter Lincoln Wills II).
9. Ibid., p.332.
17. E. Peacock, 'Extracts from the Churchwardens' Accounts of the Parish of Leveton', Archaeologia, XLI/2 (1867), pp.333-57; L.A.O. Leveton Par/7/1 f.224.
23. Lincoln Wills II, p.84.
25. L.A.O. LCC Wills 1532/4 ff.159v and 42.
30. Lincoln Wills II p.173; L.A.O. LCC Wills 1535/7 f.1135v.
33. L.A.O. LCC Wills 1535/7 f.30v.
34. Lincoln Wills II p.130; Lincoln Wills II p.116.
36. Lincoln Wills II pp.34, 142, 150, 151(2) and 156; L.A.O. LCC Wills 1535/7 f.89v.
43. Lincoln Wills I pp.41 and 43.
44. Lincoln Wills II pp.146, 175 and 183.
46. Lincoln Wills II p.189.
47. For a discussion of this possibility see Ketteringham, 'Secular Life . . .', p.251.
49. A record of all those known to have taken part in the Lincolnshire Rising will be found in Ketteringham, 'Secular Life . . .', Appendix D, p.356. For a more detailed account of the Rising than can be given here see A. Ward, The Lincolnshire Rising (Nottingham, 1986).
50. Pevsner, Lincolnshire, pp.92-93.
51. Ibid., p.679.
52. Ibid., pp.394-395.
53. Ibid., p.221. For details of these and other building campaigns of this time see the Appendix to this paper.
54. Letters and Papers Foreign and Domestic of the Reign of Henry VIII, edited by J. Gairngh, XI (1888), no.975. The term to 'ring the bells backwards' means instead of ringing the bells in the usual order 1234 with the smallest first, they were rung in the order 4321 commencing with the largest.
55. Ketteringham 'Secular Life . . .', pp.95 and 272.