

Community Conflict and Collective Memory in the Late Medieval Parish Church

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Introduction

What role does conflict play in the formation of community identity? And how do powerful, even violent, moments sustain that identity throughout centuries of change and transformation? Questions such as these galvanize this present study, which undertakes to illustrate the vibrancy of parish life in late medieval England by examining fifteenth-century monastic-parochial disputes, that is, when parishioners fought against monks with whom they shared their church buildings. Shared churches, in which monasteries and parish churches were physically joined, were not uncommon in late medieval England, whether the monastery was attached to an existing parish church or came to replace the parish church and served both the monks and parishioners.¹

These disputes over shared space have captivated local historians because of their intensity and violence as well as the parishioners' relative success in using such violence to gain more control over their churches' space. But rather than approaching these conflicts under the pretense that they were aberrations in otherwise normal parish life, I will examine how they can shed light on the multi-faceted ways late medieval parishioners habitually tested and negotiated the boundaries of parish life. I will especially explore the function of conflict in forging a link between medieval parish communities and their parish church buildings. Additionally, I will examine how these buildings have functioned as links between today's parish communities and

¹ An article by English scholar Martin Heale suggests that there were over 200 monastic-parochial churches in England by the late Middle Ages. See Heale, "Monastic-Parochial Churches in Late Medieval England," *The Parish in Late Medieval England: Proceedings from the 2002 Harlaxton Symposium*, Harlaxton Medieval Studies 14, Clive Burgess and Eamon Duffy, eds. (Paul Watkins Publishing, 2002), 54-77.

their medieval forbearers. To this end, this paper will first examine two case studies: a 1410 dispute over the belfry in the shared church of Wymondham, Norfolk, and two fifteenth-century disputes over the placement of the baptismal font in the shared church of Sherborne, Dorset. This first section of the paper will analyze the common catalysts for these disputes and the ways parishioners, calling on custom, resolved these disputes and resumed peaceful relations with their monastic neighbors. I will then move from the medieval memory of custom to the modern memory of these turbulent moments, drawing especially on my fieldwork in each parish on how nostalgia and folklore have connected today's parishioners with their medieval pasts via the buildings that emerged from conflict.

Battles in the Belfry: The Monastic-Parochial Dispute at Wymondham

Wymondham's rich local historiography is largely due to its wealth of surviving medieval documents, which allow us to trace the parish community's history to the founding of the monastery. In 1107, Lord William de Albani (D'Aubigny) dedicated a Benedictine priory to St. Mary and endowed it with Wymondham's parish church and its tithes, revenues, land, tenants, and the right to appoint the priest.² Outright competition over Wymondham's shared church began as early as the 1240s, when confusion over parish and monastic rights over the shared church required papal clarification, but came to a head with the monastery's rebuilding project that included the demolition of the Norman central tower in 1376 and the final construction in 1409 of the octagonal central tower that remains today.³ Most invasive to the parish church was

² Note that Wymondham was a priory from 1107 through 1448 and then an abbey from 1448 until its dissolution in 1538. Although no longer a functioning abbey, parishioners have continued to refer to it as such.

³ Wymondham Parish Church (WPC) 9/2/1, Sentence by Cardinal John in the cause between Walter archdeacon of Norfolk and the prior and convent of Wymondham that churches were not exempt; 11 June 1249; and WPC 9/2/2, notarial instrument providing copy of bills of Pope Innocent exemplifying above judgment, 22 June 1258. Original papal bull dated 10 Kalends July (22 June) 1249, transcribed in Martin Jones, *Wymondham and its Abbey* (Wymondham and Attleborough: H.G. Stone and Company, 1914 first ed; 1946 reprint), 50; Francis Blomefield, *An Essay Towards the Topographical History of the Country of Norfolk*, Vol. 1 (London: W. Bulmer and Co., 1805).

the monks' temporary transfer of the abbey bells to the parishioners' northwest tower, which they eventually closed to the parishioners when they finished the project. After reaching no satisfactory answer to their demands for control over their own bells, the churchwardens and parishioners hung three bells in a temporary tower above the north porch and then boarded up the doors that provided entry to the monks for the collection of offerings. We know from the prior's petitions to royal courts that several parishioners of Wymondham attacked the prior and convent in the summer of 1409 by driving him into his chambers, stealing his cattle, and cutting down trees in the churchyard, ostensibly in reaction to blocked access to the parish church bells.⁴ Twenty-four parishioners are named in several series of commissions held in Wymondham between 1409 and 1411 in response to the prior's complaint that parishioners had harassed him and the monastery, the ringleader being one William Growt, along with Thomas Boteler, and Robert Kempe.⁵ Moreover, all twenty-four men appear either as named instigators or witnesses in almost every related legal document.⁶ Evincing the gravity of the matter is Archbishop Thomas Arundel's admonition to the parishioners in 1410 and the commission composed of Norfolk nobles and the sheriff who arrived in Wymondham in 1411 to settle the bell dispute.⁷

⁴ WPC 9/1/5. See also The National Archives, Kew, London (TNA) KB 9.82: *...introiverunt cimiterium ecclesiae beate marie de Wymondham...et arbores...prioris in eodem cimiterio...susciderunt...et quod venerunt ad ecclesiam parochialem de Wymondham...et quoddam ostium iuxta altare beate marie virginis cum cemento et lapidibus clausurunt ne monachi ibidem...introirent in ecclesiam predictam.* See also TNA KB 9.82 for a slightly different copy of the same enquiry, which deals especially with the parishioners' attacks on the prior's *bona et catalla*; and see also WPC 9/1/3 and 9/1/4, which clarify that the riot was in response to blocked access to church bells: 9/1/3 (similar wording in Arundel's final judgment in 9/1/4): *...discordie inter vos et prioratum de Wymondham super pulsatione campanarum prioris et monachorum...*; 9/1/2: *...fregerunt et tres campanas in divini cultus perturbacionem dicti prioris et conventus suspenderunt ubi non usitati sint.*

⁵ Addressed in the Archbishop's admonition, WPC 9/1/3; see also WPC 9/1/2, 9/1/5, TNA KB 9.82, and C1.69.146.

⁶ William Groust or Growt is listed first in nearly every document except for on the commission held in the summer of 1411. It could be that he had died except that he appears in a land deed dated 21 January 1415, WPC 11/1, Title Deeds and Copyholds/Ancient Deeds Before 1547.

⁷ WPC 9/1/2 and 9/1/3.

The King's involvement in the matter was likely due to the parishioners' royal petition stating hyperbolically that the short stature of their tower made it difficult to hear the bells and so they often missed masses and their children were dying unbaptized.⁸ The petition is undated but seems to be the missing link between the first commission and the king's eventual direct involvement.⁹ After two years of litigation, it was confirmed that parishioners had the right to hang bells in their northwest tower provided that they did not disturb the monks.¹⁰ Several years later, in 1445, and with the support of patrons Sir John Clifton and Sir Andrew Ogard, the prior conceded the land for the project that would produce the west tower that continues to hold the parish church's bells.¹¹ Soon after, in 1448, the priory became its own independent abbey. Besides a few visitation reports that cite great negligence of the monks in the sixteenth century, including several cases of licentiousness, it would appear that the conflicts ended with parishioners' acquisition of their own bell tower and their relative independence from the Abbey.¹²

Sherborne's Battles for the Baptismal Font

Moving from East Anglia to the West Country, the fifteenth-century monastic-parochial disputes at Sherborne provide an interesting contrast to Wymondham while at the same time highlighting the common catalysts for and functionality of conflict in medieval parish life. The church at

⁸ WPC 9/1/1.

⁹ WPC 9/1/1.

¹⁰ WPC 9/1/1-9/1/6: "Letters Patent of Henry IV to Thomas Arundel, Archbishop of Canterbury," May 16, 1411, 9/1/2; "Admonition of archbishop of Canterbury to parishioners," 9/1/3; "Judgment of Thomas Arundel, Archbishop of Canterbury, confirming parishioners' rights in the church of Wymondham, c. 1411," 9/1/4, and "Copy of proceedings in the Exchequer, Excerpt from the Coram Rege Rolls, 1410-1412, 9/1/6.

¹¹ WPC 9/1/6

¹² A. Jessopp, ed., *Visitations of the Diocese of Norwich*, The Camden Society (Westminster: Nicols and Sons, 1888), 95-101. For example, one such complaint against the prior alleges *quod fama laborat publica priorem suspectum frequentare consortium uxoris Johannis Smyth*, 102.

Sherborne was originally the site of a cathedral before the diocese was moved to Salisbury in the early twelfth century; thereafter, the church at Sherborne remained a Benedictine abbey, and the existing church dates to the monks' fifteenth-century renovations and a later nineteenth-century restoration. The nave of the abbey church served the parish until around 1400 when the monks built a chapel of ease to the west of the abbey church. Note that its designation as a chapel meant that, unlike Wymondham, it would not have had a perpetual vicarage and so depended on the monastery to conduct services and perform baptisms.

We first know of tension and conflict between the monastery and parish of Sherborne from the 1436 Register of the Bishop of Salisbury, Robert Neville.¹³ It records petitions from the abbot and parishioners to resolve a conflict over the placement of the baptismal font, where parishioners had received baptism from “time immemorial.”¹⁴ Apparently, the monks’ restoration of the conventual church had resulted in a narrowed doorway between the west end of their church and the east end of the chapel of All Hallows, where the parishioners held their services instead of in the nave of the monastic church as they had previously done. Due to the narrowed doorway and other new construction, the monks moved the baptismal font from its original place, slightly farther away from the entrance to All Hallows.¹⁵ In response, parishioners constructed and replaced their own baptismal font so they could continue their processions as they had before the monks had initiated their renovations. Neville’s ordinance sought a compromise between the two communities—that the monks replace the customary font in its

¹³ WSHC Register of Bishop of Salisbury Robert Neville, 1427-1438, D1/2/9 Folio 108v-109r.

¹⁴ Neville Register, fol. 108: *a tempore cuius contrarii memoria hominum non existit, lavacro regenerationis hactenus fuerant renati seu saltem ita renasci deberent, certi tum parochiani ibidem...*and so on.

¹⁵ Neville Register, fol. 108: *necnon super arcto et stricto introitu ostii in muro intermedio in parte australi inter locum parochianorum et corpus ecclesiae monasterii...cum processione ad fontem in ecclesia dicti monasterii in festis Paschae et Penthecostes...*and so on.

original location and the parishioners remove their new one, and the monks pay for an intermediate partition in the nave of the monastic church, near the choir, to more distinctly separate the two communities.¹⁶

Similar to Wymondham, this was a conflict instigated by parishioners' desire to retain custom—customary privileges, obviously, but also the space in which they customarily moved and the font placement which was the focus of habitual liturgical practice that defined their relationship with their parish and abbey ideologically and spatially. Moreover, the bishop's compromise clearly did not satisfy parishioners at All Hallows, since the parishioners' font was still standing even in the summer of 1437. In retaliation, the monks sent Walter Gallor, a butcher, to destroy the font.¹⁷ Full-scale violence erupted in response to this destruction, and on 28 October 1437, Richard Vowell, priest at All Hallows, shot a flaming arrow into the abbey church, which was under construction and covered by a thatched roof, and destroyed most the east side of the church, including the choir and belfry. The effects of the fire can still be seen today; the columns from the choir to the thick partition that had been built to separate the parishioners from the monks are still reddened due to the high iron content in the stone.¹⁸ Moreover, thanks to the partition required by the bishop, the fire did not move any farther west into the original church, and a clear line can be discerned between the fire-damaged east end and

¹⁶ Neville Register, fol. 109: *clausum etiam intermedium in navi ecclesiae monasterialis juxta chorum monachorum ita quod sit quaedam separatio distincta inter monachos et parochianos predictos fieri columnas sumptibus et expensis dicti monasterii.*

¹⁷ J.H.P. Gibb, *The Battle of the Fonts*, no publication information; booklet sent courtesy of the Reverend Canon Eric Woods, DL, November 2012. Gibb notes that it is uncertain whether or not there were also factions in the parish community and if some parishioners had supported sending Gallor to smelt the All Hallows' font, 8.

¹⁸ Sherborne Annals, *Historia Regum Anglia ad AD 1456*, Harley MS 3906, fol. 108-111; Trinity College Cambridge, Wren Library MS R.7.13, *Chronicon W. Malmesburiensis de Gestis Pontificum*, fol. 49-50; Gibb, 10-11.

preserved parts of the west end, meaning that the fire started by the parishioners did not touch their own space.

The Sherborne Annals, which is the only extant source for the riot, notes that in 1450 the parishioners replaced their smashed font with a new one. This time, Bishop Neville's successor did not require its removal but instead consecrated the font despite parishioners' violent and illegal actions between 1436 and 1450. Interestingly, no punishment is mentioned in the chronicle, in episcopal registers, or in the Calendar of Patent Rolls. In the latter, only the fire and the monastery's need for 10 pounds a year for repair is mentioned:

March 1446 Westminster: Licence, on the petition of the abbot and convent of the monastery of Shirborn, co. Dorset, shewing that their choir, bell -tower, and the bells therein and other buildings were burnt by a sudden fire, for them to acquire in mortmain lands and rents to the value of 10 li a year, not held in chief.¹⁹

Thus thirteen years later, after two font disputes and an attack on the Abbey, the parishioners finally had achieved more independence from the monks, had a perpetual vicarage, and their own font in its customary place.²⁰

Catalysts for Conflict: Access, Practice, and Custom

These monastic-parochial conflicts reveal that, while in reaction to different local circumstances, both violent disputes were in reaction to limited access, whether to tithes and offerings at the altar, to the bells and bell tower, to processional routes, to the monastic church, or to the baptismal font and other liturgical furnishings. Specifically, the walls that intentionally or unintentionally separated the monastic and parish churches are particularly important in

¹⁹ Calendar of Patent Rolls, Henry VI, Vol. IV 14410-1446 (London: Mackie and Co., Ltd, 1908), 46.

²⁰ See Leland's Itineraries for mention of a possible parish church status, 295; and J.H.P. Gibb, *The Battle of the Fonts*, 14, for evidence of a perpetual vicarage in All Hallows by the 1450s.

understanding parishioners' understanding of proper access. Recall that parishioners at Wymondham protested, both through petitions and violence, when the monks' renovations resulted in closure of their bell tower. Moreover, the construction of the monks' central tower resulted in a thick wall that separated their church from the parishioners' space. At Sherborne, not only were parishioners moved out of the abbey church prior to the conflict, but the bishop later required the construction of a partition to further separate the two communities. Folklore and local histories claim parishioners built these walls to keep the monks out of their space—an appealing story for those who have anticlerical interpretations of the past driven often by Protestant interests—but the conflicts actually emerged from the parishioners' frustration that they were being kept out of spaces that were traditionally theirs or had been previously accessible. In both cases, therefore, parishioners wanted it both ways: they did not want to be cut off from the monastic church to which they were attached but they also wanted more control over their own space. The post-Reformation situation at Sherborne particularly supports this argument: it was their church parishioners tore down when Henry's VIII's men set about dissolving England's monasteries,²¹ and then they moved back into the abbey church that had once been the Cathedral.

These case studies also demonstrate that the parishioners who fought against the monastery were not reacting rashly, but consciously, demanding what they knew was theirs to control. Their keen understanding of their rights and obligations was based on local conventions as well as socio-economic changes that allowed for more flexibility in peasants' customary obligations. Indeed, there is no question, thanks to recent studies of the English parish by

²¹ Henry VIII declared himself the Supreme Head of the Church in 1534, breaking with the Pope and the Roman Catholic Church. Two years later he enacted the Dissolution of the Monasteries, and sent his deputies to appropriate all monastic property and dismantle their communities and buildings.

scholars such as Katherine French, Eamon Duffy, and Gervase Rosser, that parishioners by the late Middle Ages were invested in the use, maintenance, and embellishment of their parish churches.²² To attribute these conscious obligations to increased piety alone would be somewhat naïve, but parochial obligations prescribed by Lateran IV (1215) and English synods later in the same century indeed came to be widely internalized by fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.²³

Parishioners not only knew of their duties to the nave and aisles of their parish churches, but also created lay positions, such as the office of churchwarden, and new liturgical exercises to better fund and care for and worship in their parish churches. Moreover, the late medieval liturgy itself had become more complex and embellished, and parishioners had taken on the responsibility of providing and maintaining the furnishings and vestments that augmented liturgical practices of the parish and local guilds. Although conflict was not the primary method through which parishioners secured rights and funds to maintain and embellish their churches, it is unsurprising that, when push came to shove, they would assert themselves both violently and through litigation to ensure they could carry out their responsibilities to the parish church and community.

Furthermore, conflict itself played an important role in maintaining parish custom while strengthening the community's relationships with each other and to the parish church. Conflict functioned to bring the community together as it appeared before royal and ecclesiastical commissions, drew up petitions, and physically fought the monks for their church. Moreover, as the community had to articulate collective concerns it expressed an understanding of who they

²² See Katherine French, *The People of the Parish* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001); Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, c.1400-1580* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992); Gervase Rosser, "Conflict and Political Community in the Medieval Town: Disputes Between Clergy and Laity in Hereford," in *The Church in the Medieval Town*, eds. T.R. Slater and Gervase Rosser (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), 21-42, and "Going to the Fraternity Feast: Commensality and Social Relations in Late Medieval England," *The Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 4 (October 1994), 430-446.

²³ Winchester Statutes, 1222-28; Council of Oxford, 1222; Exeter Statutes, 1287.

were, ideologically and legally. Thus conflict had a unifying function, if not a completely transformative one. In fact, relations were re-asserted and quite congenial between parish and monastery at Wymondham. At Sherborne, the tensions remained until the monastery was dissolved, but the community nonetheless had a perpetual vicar and control over their baptismal font without further fight. I am not trying to argue that conflict always had a positive, unifying outcome, but in these cases, conflict certainly helped these parish communities to more precisely express their role in caring for and running these churches that so defined their religious and social lives in that particular locale.

It is also significant that increased tension between parishioners and monks for control over their church buildings took place at the same time manorialism was undergoing a distinct transformation in the wake of the Black Death, which allowed for more flexibility in manorial maneuverings for peasants, particularly the wealthy ones. At Wymondham in particular, parishioners deftly made demands, defended their actions, and protected their privileges through all three jurisdictional levels—the parish, vill, and manor—regarding both the church building and surrounding land. Although few manorial rolls exist from the time of the conflict, there is a large collection of deeds from the late fourteenth through sixteenth centuries that allows us to speculate on the landed interests of the parishioners actively involved in the monastic-parochial dispute.²⁴ Wymondham Priory was well-endowed from its founding well into the late Middle Ages. It had interests in over fifty parishes in the county of Norfolk and had appropriated ten churches in addition to Wymondham itself. The Bishop of Norwich required that part of the original twelfth-century estate support the perpetual vicarage and the larger portion support the

²⁴ WPC 11/1—Deeds and copyholds/Ancient deeds before 1547.

priory.²⁵ The land of Northfield is particularly prevalent in deeds dated shortly before and after the conflict (1380s-1421), and the men involved in these land exchanges and confirmations were the very same men named in commissions pertaining to the conflict between 1409 and 1411. Specifically, William Growt's name appears in over a dozen deeds as a grantor, grantee, or witness, and twenty of the forty-some parishioners named in the legal proceedings for conflicts are similarly involved in land transfers. Since the *curia domini* is not mentioned in these deeds and the land involved does not belong to the priory, the land exchanged was likely freehold, possibly sold by the prior to tenants not long before the dates of the late medieval deeds.²⁶ The most important point about these deeds surrounding the conflict at Wymondham is that economic and religious interests were intertwined when it came to the parish church building. The men involved in the land exchanges and the conflicts were simultaneously tenants, landholders, and parishioners, demonstrating that the fifteenth century was a time when tenants and parishioners had room to maneuver in their customary obligations, and were beginning to exert power over these responsibilities.²⁷

Wymondham and Strategic Memorialization

Up to this point, this study has illustrated how these medieval monastic-parochial disputes were conscious and effective forms of collective action, and these actions, legal and illegal, were primarily object-driven. The bell tower, the font, the very parish building itself, were the objects

²⁵ Cattermole, 59.

²⁶ Northfield was part of the monastery's original endowment at its founding in 1107. See Cattermole, 47.

²⁷ For more on late medieval manorialism in England generally and East Anglia specifically, see Mark Bailey, *The English Manor, c.1200-1500* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002) and idem., *Medieval Suffolk: An Economic and Social History, 1200-1500* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2007).

around which medieval parishioners formulated their arguments and recalled custom to justify their violence and demands. The building did not just represent parishioners' religious and social identities—it shaped those identities and provided impetus for collective action. As such, the parish church as physical structure and ideal has had the potential to motivate community action and shape community identity today. The monastic-parochial conflicts at Wymondham and Sherborne have played important roles in connecting modern parishioners to their medieval pasts and in encouraging them to follow in the footsteps of their predecessors who had funded and constructed the present building—especially in the case of Wymondham but also, much more subtly, at Sherborne. Memory in this exploration is thus treated as an action, or more accurately, commemoration, defined by James Fentress and Chris Wickham as “the action of speaking or writing about memories, as well as the formal re-enactment of the past.”²⁸ By employing the notion of memory in this way, this study will now shift from an examination of the function of conflict to the function of memory in shaping and informing parish community identity.²⁹

For Wymondham, the church's two towers dominating the town's skyline are what particularly intrigue visitors—it is not often one encounters a parish church with one square and one octagonal tower. The church's towers are even the logo of the local junior school. It is thanks to local historians who, since the nineteenth century, have written church guides, walking guides, and locally-published histories that these towers and their medieval history have continued to define the parish community's identity. One of the most remarkable memorializations of the medieval conflicts comes from E.B Pomeroy's turn-of-the-century lecture requesting donations from parishioners to restore the west tower, the very tower the medieval parishioners built after

²⁸ James Fentress and Chris Wickham, *Social Memory: New Perspective on the Past* (Oxford, UK and Cambridge, USA: Blackwell, 1992, 1994), x.

²⁹ Fentress and Wickham, 88.

their disputes with the monks. This talk, given shortly before significant renovations on the church were to begin, sought to create a strong emotive response from the parishioners that would result in an outpouring of donations. Pomeroy's strategy was to elaborate on the bell tower's construction in the fifteenth century, with particular emphasis on the medieval parishioners' collective efforts to build it in the midst of adversity. Especially important to Pomeroy was the parishioners' petition to build a tower "worthy of the edifice," which would not only hold more bells but also equal or even surpass the beauty of the monks' new octagonal tower. Pomeroy's strategy to secure donations from his fellow parishioners was especially effective when he contrasted medieval collective efforts to improve their tower to the dismal efforts of his contemporaries:

Such an undertaking could not be carried out at all, *in our day*, without extraordinary efforts and rare benevolence. We have no unpaid cleric to act as architect, materials nowadays are not given for nothing to the Glory of God, and workmen who find, in the sanctity of their work, a sufficient substitute for any wages beyond those necessary to a bare subsistence, do not exist.³⁰

Pomeroy concluded by asking fellow parishioners to emulate their medieval ancestors, for "it would be sad to reflect on, *if such a work of our forefathers were to be allowed to go to ruin for the sake of a little over £100.*"³¹ It is striking just how vividly Pomeroy brought the conflicts to life in his lecture, a strategy that was effective in interpreting the medieval building as well as defining an identity for the parish communities that have worshiped in this building, one unbroken since the fifteenth century.

³⁰ E.B. Pomeroy, WPC 16/4/4, 7-8. My italics.

³¹ E.B. Pomeroy, 8. My italics.

Today, as the current churchwardens are trying to refocus visitors' attention to the present rather than past function of the church, the story of the fifteenth-century conflicts looms large in the fabric of the church and minds of parishioners. For instance, a month or so after I had completed my fieldwork in Spring 2013, I stopped into Wymondham Abbey to give a tour to one of my colleagues and was fortunate enough to be greeted by a steward who was eager to share a story that featured the medieval conflicts. This is one of many occasions when a steward has told some version of the medieval conflict story as a way of interesting visitors. Her narrative was particularly dramatic and pro-laity and anti-monk: the prior and monks were stealing tithes, the conflict went on for centuries, the Pope stepped in several times to mediate, King Henry IV issued an edict, both leaders took the parishioners' side, the bold parishioners built a wall and blocked the east doors to keep the monks out, and early twentieth-century architects allowed the two blocked doors to remain as a memorial of the parishioners and the conflict. Very little of this is true; there is no evidence that the parishioners built the wall, the Pope only issued a bull in 1249, and the King never issued an edict but simply determined that a commission should be held to resolve the conflict. However, quite interestingly, nostalgic antiquarians indeed retained the east wall, despite the fact that architects during the nineteenth-and twentieth-century renovations wanted to remove it and start again or expand the chancel. Writing a few decades after E.B. Pomeroy, Ninian Comper, a nationally renowned architect responsible for the church's elaborate altar screen, indicated in his 1913 design plans that parishioners' dedication to the medieval conflict was a significant obstacle. He argued that it would be architecturally appealing for an eastern arch and a great window to be added to the east end, with the altar placed under the tower between the old arch and the new one.³² However, Comper had to resign

³² Ninian Comper, "1913: Wymondham Church," J.B. Pomeroy, ed., Wymondham Abbey Muniment Room (3/4/7/1), 1.

himself to the fact that a fundraising campaign for the new construction would be pointless since local antiquarians and several parishioners would have protested the removal of the late medieval east wall, which represented “the long history of quarrel between parish and monks.”³³ Comper openly expressed his frustration with this opposition, claiming that parishioners should emulate their medieval predecessors' enthusiasm for good architecture and remove the east wall that prevented a new and more beautiful chancel. Local antiquarians, however, saw beauty not in the wall's physicality but in its meaning.

Thus for antiquarians as well as many active parishioners today, the church's fabric embodies the medieval past. Returning to the tour of the church in 2013, the steward was quite direct about the continuity she believes exists between today's parishioners and their medieval parishioners: that people in Wymondham have always been a “stroppy lot,” beginning with the medieval conflict and continuing into present town conflicts.³⁴ A former vicar of Wymondham concurred that such continuity indeed exists connecting the medieval conflicts to the character of parishioners in Wymondham, but he saw it in a much more negative light. He explained that it is well known throughout Norfolk that Wymondham is a contentious place—even the Bishop of Norwich, he claims, once remarked that the parish has been a “miasma” of contention and bad relations ever since the late Middle Ages. To his mind, Wymondham was and still is the only place he has lived where people have done such an obvious reading backwards of history, using the medieval past to define their present actions. He emphasized that this continuity is clearly imagined, but nonetheless has come to so define the parishioners that they use it as their rationale

³³ Comper, 1.

³⁴ Conversation with author, Wymondham Abbey, 2 April 2013. The steward's examples of post-medieval contentiousness were specifically Kett's Rebellion (1549) and, more recently, a conflict between a large majority of the townspeople and the town council over a new housing development.

for why things are so problematic at the church.³⁵ What I want to particularly emphasize is that this continuity, imagined or not, is firmly anchored in the existing parish church. Whether it is a church tour, a guidebook, or even a bid for outside funding, their point of reference is the conflict that led to how the church looks today—the widened north aisle, the east wall, the ornate angel roof in the nave, the stately west tower—all of this was done as a result of the parishioners' success in fighting the monks for more access to their church.³⁶

Sherborne's White Washed History

By way of contrast is the memory of the fire at Sherborne—everyone knows about this fire, but it has become a stagnant memory, one that fascinates but does not activate parishioners to connect to their church or a continuous collective identity. Indeed, while Wymondham's locals are looking backwards in a strategic way to the medieval conflicts to construct a certain identity, Sherborn's conflict narrative has been passed down through a steady line of chronicles and histories beginning in the Middle Ages, which has resulted in folklore about the conflict, told from the side of the monks rather than the parishioners. Only a handful of local historians have, rather unsuccessfully, tried to connect this conflict to the inherent character of Sherbornians.

The Sherborne Annals, as I mentioned earlier, recorded this conflict in the 1450s and set the stage for folklore to paint parishioners as seditious and anticlerical. A century later, John Leland, England's first antiquarian who chronicled the post-Dissolution state of parish churches, also remarked on the parishioners' seditiousness and was astonished that they had torn down their own parish church at the Dissolution. By the time nineteenth-century antiquarians took on the task of re-introducing the conflict to fellow historians and the general public, the medieval

³⁵ Conversation with Author, Norwich Cathedral Library, 16 April 2013.

³⁶ The Heritage Lottery Fund recently awarded Wymondham Abbey over £1M to renovate their church. Part of the bid included proposals for interpreting the unique space of their shared church, including emphasis on the medieval parishioners' efforts to rebuild it after the 1409-1411 conflicts.

narrations were already established as the primary histories of the event. These local antiquarian histories tried to strike a balance between carrying on these narrations and also drawing interest to the unique appearance of this parish church building that was once an abbey church; unlike with Wymondham, there was little effort to strategically re-interpret the medieval and early modern narratives to evoke an emotional connection to the medieval parishioners who were behind the Great Fire of 1437. A guide from 1862 explained that the red and charred columns of the church are “by no means a blemish,” but simply “bear witness” to the intensity of the medieval fire.³⁷ Local historian Joseph Fowler goes even further in his 1951 history of Sherborne by calling the burned columns “fossilized remains of a quarrel.”³⁸ These early attempts to reconstruct the social context for the fire have also passed down the story that there are bows and arrows carved on the choir roof, always pointing in the same direction, which one historian speculated was the “quarter from which the fatal arrow was shot” by the “incendiary priest.”³⁹ While there is no evidence today of these bows and arrows, or perhaps because there is no evidence, it is clear that the fire has been the primary method of highlighting the unique design and appearance of the medieval church. In other words, the best way to explain the charred stone of this grand parish church is to explain the conflict that formed it. Indeed, for most who were writing about the church in the nineteenth-and twentieth-centuries, the fire *was* the parish history, and for many today, it still is.

That these narratives have focused more on the conflict than the parishioners themselves has meant that pride is not part of modern parishioners' memories of the conflict. Rather, these

³⁷ Rev. Edward Harston, *A Handbook to the Abbey Church of St. Mary Sherborne*, Second Edition (London and Oxford: John Henry and James Parker, 1862), 40-41.

³⁸ Joseph Fowler, *Mediaeval Sherborne* (Dorchester: Longmans, 1951), 266.

³⁹ Harston, 42; 47. Reverend Canon C. H. Mayo, *The Official Guide to the Abbey Church of St. Mary the Virgin Sherborne with a Sufficient Historical Setting* (Sherborne: F. Bennett and Co., 1925), 46-48.

conflicts hold a place in the town's history as an unfortunate but unique part of the parish church's past, used to explain the uniqueness that an Abbey church—complete with fan vaulting—would serve the parish today. But how the medieval conflicts have been remembered, whether in narratives or in the very fabric of the church, has been dependent on who in Sherborne has controlled the narratives and funding for the church. In a conversation with the present vicar, the Reverend Canon Eric Woods, and a well-known local historian, Dr. Huw Ridgeway, it became clear that question of how to restore the church—that is, what era of the church's history to re-produce—was a source of tension amongst the patrons, Victorian restorers, and locals in general. Moreover, at the same time, the medieval conflicts had become rather whitewashed.⁴⁰ The High Church, Anglo-Catholic leanings of the parish church's patrons, the Wingfield-Digby family, have ensured that the battles over the baptismal font and the Great Fire remain part of the town's folklore rather than seminal moments in the parish's history. Indeed, for High Church Anglicans, anticlericalism is the exact opposite to the story they want to promote. In addition, High Church sentiments favor Catholic “tradition” rather than social history, especially one as turbulent as Sherborne's. The church, said Reverend Woods, has served as a totem of tradition and continuity for many interested parties, including the patrons and the nineteenth-century High-Church vicar, Reverend Harston, but this continuity has not included a link between present and past parishioners.

Dr. Ridgeway expressed frustration that the patrons' manipulation of Sherborne's history has ensured he cannot write the church guide as he would like. In fact, he had no knowledge of the conflict when he moved to Sherborne thirty years ago and cannot, it seems, add the social context of the medieval church without upsetting the traditional narrative that most locals and the

⁴⁰ Conversation with author, the Vicarage, Sherborne, Dorset, 20-21 November 2012.

patrons prefer. He claims, with obvious regret, that the adoration for the monastic church that became the parish church has transformed over the centuries into adoration for the monks who built it rather than the parishioners who purchased it. Locals, too, have come to embrace the narrative that lauds the parishioners for their purchase and ignores their earlier attempts to burn it down. In his lecture to the Sherborne Museum Association, Dr. Ridgeway said it was his goal to replace “heritage worship” and High-Church sentiments with critical history, but he is doubtful that it will dispel the “myth” of the church’s continuity with the monastic past.⁴¹ The curator of the Sherborne Museum repeated almost verbatim Dr. Ridgeway’s assessment—that the medieval conflict has been “sanitized,” to the point that the conflict is well-known but not given any power over locals’ perceptions of their past. As a result, she says, locals do not realize the medieval conflicts were only the beginning of the town’s history of radicalism. For instance, she links the medieval riots to an eighteenth-century riot about poor laws during which locals stole the vicars’ alcohol and broke the castle’s windows; thereafter, the Wingfield-Digby family was suspicious of rituals and banned a processional which many surmise had roots in late medieval parish processions.⁴² Consequently, Sherborne’s conflict is important to the community insofar as it is necessary for interpreting the space of the church—to clarify the identity of the church building itself rather than the vicar and parishioners who started the fire or the present community.

Conclusion: From Community Conflict to Collective Memory

Memory and memorialization have played important roles in this chapter, both as notions and actions. Recall that memory was an essential component of parishioners’ violence or litigation and monks’ reactions to it. In particular, parishioners’ actions were based on what they knew of

⁴¹ Huw Rideway, “In His Master’s Footsteps,” Lecture to the Sherborne Museum Association, 21 January 2012.

⁴² Elisabeth Bletsoe, Curator, Sherborne Local History Museum, conversation with author, 3 May 2013.

custom or time out of mind, which gave them legal and ideological incentive to fight and eventually fund their parish churches. Yet the retelling of these conflicts discontinued with either the resolution of the conflict or with the sixteenth-century dissolution of England's monasteries, meaning that around 300 years had passed before antiquarians set about reviving their local and national past. Most cultural anthropologists agree that "memories perceived as continuous with the past provide a sense of history and connection, a sense of personal and group identities," prompting memory construction to reinstate this sense of continuity.⁴³ For many historians, this meant a reconstruction of the architectural history of the church. But as we have seen, reconstructing and remembering the medieval conflicts have not simply assisted in architectural interpretation—they have also served as "hooks" for understanding and ultimately remembering parish communities' medieval ancestors. Since these memories have not been passed down intact, parishioners have needed something to jog their memories, to help them to "remember", and the dramatic story of parishioners trapping a prior in his chambers or shooting a flaming arrow into an abbey chancel is indeed jolting enough to do just that.⁴⁴

This study has asked readers to consider the late medieval parish church building, both concretely and conceptually, as a building that was and still is shaped by conflict. It is an ideological space that has the potential to link today's parishioners, who are striving to maintain their beloved parish churches, with their medieval counterparts, who fought to build them. Through this approach, therefore, I have sought to demonstrate the myriad functions of conflict. In its most obvious form, conflict motivated community action on behalf of the parish church building. In the process, conflict became a force that shaped the fabric and space of these parish

⁴³ Jacob J. Climo and Maria G. Cattell, eds. *Social Memory and History: Anthropological Perspectives* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2002), 27.

⁴⁴ Mary Carruthers notes that memories are stronger if they are "emotionally-colored." See *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400-1200* (Cambridge University Press, 1998, 2000, 2006), 14-15.

church buildings. And finally, from the nineteenth century through to the present, the medieval conflicts have evolved into historical narratives that have encouraged locals and visitors to interpret, relate to, and ultimately remember the origins and ancestors of their late medieval churches.