

Response to 'Community Conflict and Collective Memory in the late Medieval Parish Church' by Kristi Woodward Bain, Northwestern University

Kristi Bain wants to know the role that conflict played in the formation of community identity in late medieval England. It's an excellent question and one that looms large in any consideration of early modern communities precisely because the competing claims of religious groups in the age of Reformations were so often fraught with violence and bloodshed, creating and shaping legacies that endured in many communities. In pursuit of historical research, we create our own memories of imagined pasts that stay with us. I vividly recall as a doctoral student trying to understand how the parishioners in the small market town of Hadleigh in Suffolk, an ecclesiastical peculiar of the Archbishop of Canterbury, made sense of the religious changes that were mandated by the Crown in the successive reigns of three Tudors: Henry VIII, Edward VI and Mary I. This was, I decided, a place wracked with conflict, with a powerful and wealthy group of clothiers doing their best to thwart the evangelical agenda of Thomas Cranmer and his lieutenants, the best known of which was the Cambridge trained civil and canon lawyer, Dr Rowland Taylor, a massive Northerner whose ability as a witty and formidable preacher made him as many enemies as friends. In the reign of Queen Mary he was condemned as a heretic and burned at the stake on Aldham Common just north of the town. Ten or twenty years later, the place of his death was marked by a rough hewn stone with a crudely carved inscription telling the passer by that in this place Taylor 'left his blode.' The stone still stands. In echoes of the stories that Bain has uncovered from her visits to the parish churches of Wymondham and Sherborne, the late W.A.B. Jones, a local historian of Hadleigh, used to amuse himself by telling me that,

ignorant of Dr Taylor's vigorous opposition to Anabaptism, it was the youth group of the local Baptist church that organized work parties to keep the ancient stone clean.

The cases chosen and analyzed by Bain pitted monks against parishioners. In the Norfolk parish of Wymondham, the original endowment of the Benedictine priory engendered, over time, a bitter dispute between the monks and parishioners. This dispute over the parochial control of their own bells and bell tower came to a head in the first half of the fifteenth century. In the shared space between Benedictines and parishioners in the Dorset parish of Sherborne, disagreements over access had, by the autumn of 1437, resulted in a smashed font and partial destruction of the abbey church by arson, the effects of which can be seen to this day. In both cases, the conflicts were resolved and accommodations made. The latter part of the paper moves from the analysis of these disputes as 'conscious and effective forms of collective action' to the ways in which these tales were and are remembered, co-opted and used in the present. This is a bold move and one that I found persuasive, willingly following Bain as she took me from the stuff of her cases to the ways in which antiquarians and clerical incumbents in Sherborne and Wymondham spun their oft inaccurate tales of community conflict. The churches remain. Stones from the fifteenth century and earlier connect the present with the past, or as Bain puts it, the building 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.'

Yet here's the rub. It takes two to tango. This sentence, persuasive and

balanced as it is, seems to silence the monastic voices that were surely an integral part of the original conflicts. Despite the agreements that were struck by 1450, the monks in both cases appear to lose, if not in the fifteenth century, then certainly in the sixteenth, thanks to Henry VIII and Thomas Cromwell. It is striking that at Wymondham and Sherborne not only were the interests of monks and parishioners inextricably entwined, but in both cases the decision to rebuild appears to lie at the heart of both conflicts. Who made these decisions and why? As Bain makes clear, the decision to enlarge or renovate clearly led to disputes over access and space, but was there a more fundamental division between secular and regular clergy, between monks and parishioners that resulted in violence? What motivated the Benedictines in both places that made them appear to ride roughshod over the 'memory of custom'? Is it possible that early fifteenth century laity were taking the initiative in ringing bells or participating in processions that were both disruptive and dismissive of monastic services? There is clearly an aural element waiting to be explored at Wymondham. And if this is right, what might explain this? All of which is another way of saying: how might Bain's stimulating and scholarly analysis of community conflict and collective memory be written if both monks and parishioners were ascribed similar levels of consciousness?

John Craig
Simon Fraser University