

University of Warwick institutional repository: <http://go.warwick.ac.uk/wrap>

This paper is made available online in accordance with publisher policies. Please scroll down to view the document itself. Please refer to the repository record for this item and our policy information available from the repository home page for further information.

To see the final version of this paper please visit the publisher's website. Access to the published version may require a subscription.

Author(s): Beat Kumin

Article Title: Late medieval churchwardens' accounts and parish government: looking beyond London and Bristol

Year of publication: 2008

Link to published version: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/ehr/119.480.87>

Publisher statement: *This is a pre-copy-editing, author-produced PDF of an article accepted for publication in The English Historical Review following peer review. The definitive publisher-authenticated version* Kumin, B. (2004). Late medieval churchwardens' accounts and parish government: looking beyond London and Bristol. The English Historical Review, 119, 480, pp. 87-99, *is available online at:* <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/ehr/119.480.87> .

Dr Beat Kumin
Department of History
University of Warwick
Coventry CV4 7AL

T: (02476) 524915
F: (02476) 523437
E: b.kumin@warwick.ac.uk

Late Medieval Churchwardens' Accounts and Parish Government: Looking beyond London and Bristol

Abstract

This contribution reviews a number of contested issues in the historiography of the late medieval English parish. In contrast to views expressed by Clive Burgess in a recent article in this journal, it is argued that the reliability of churchwardens' accounts cannot be judged in a general manner, but depends on the specific questions historians want answered. While offering reliable insights into ordinary financial transactions made by churchwardens on behalf of their parishes, they are utterly inadequate for a histoire totale of local religious life. Closer examination of the function, context and compilation of the records suggests that quantitative analysis is not only possible, but an essential prerequisite for informed discussion of parish regimes. The complexity of local communities and the desirability of comparative perspectives call for a plurality of approaches. Finally, the pivotal role of churchwardens within the varying (religious, political and administrative) configurations of the 'whole body of the parish' is reasserted.

Around 1500, Englishmen and women formed a heterogeneous social body, but almost all had one thing in common: they were parishioners. Parish studies thus promise unrivalled insights into the public lives of the vast majority of the population. This short contribution engages with a number of issues raised in a recent article on churchwardens' accounts and parish government on the eve of the Reformation (hereafter cited as 'Lessons').¹ In his article, Clive Burgess argues that scholars with particular agendas have used accounts in an uncritical fashion. He points to the possible existence of funds and activities unrecorded by the churchwardens and concludes that 'quantification remains out of the question' ('Lessons', 331). In a final section, the focus shifts to the complexity of parish government, in which the role of churchwardens should not be overstated.

Dr Burgess is the author of a string of seminal essays on pre-Reformation religion, above all relating to chantries and anniversaries in London and Bristol. His work has been instrumental for the recent reassessment of the state of the late medieval Church. This latest article provides a useful reminder of the complexity of English parishes, both in terms of surviving source material and communal organization. It also highlights two divergent approaches to parish studies. One, favoured by Burgess himself, focuses on particular case studies within a specific region or setting. Drawing on exceptionally extensive archives, he examines parish life on all levels and in all sources, employing qualitative methods and emphasizing the idiosyncrasy of individual contexts. The ultimate aim is a comprehensive view of the history and society of a given locality. A different approach, on the other hand, concentrates on 'communal' activities in comparative perspective. It considers shared canonical duties and structural similarities sufficient grounds for a nationwide analysis of parish governance. Aiming for 'breadth'

rather than ‘depth’ of coverage, the focus lies on churchwardens’ accounts as the foremost lay corporate sources and the potential of quantitative methods.² At stake, therefore, are key methodological and interpretative issues: can historians make meaningful generalizations about certain activities in English parishes? If they can, do they need thousands of in-depth case studies or are there ways to gain information on selected aspects from a more manageable sample?

Given the importance of parish accounts in the debate on the English Reformation, their reliability deserves further investigation.³ To what extent should historians be discouraged by recurrent warnings about the selective coverage of churchwardens’ accounts in particular and the opacity of medieval accounting in general?⁴ This response proceeds from methodological observations to a reassessment of the main issues raised by the ‘Lessons’. The argument proposes a basic typology for parish government and reasserts the reliability of churchwardens’ accounts for certain types of scholarly enquiry. Above all, it advocates a plurality of approaches to extract a maximum of information from scarce documentation. Historians – members of a discipline which has experienced the coming and going of so many ‘schools’ – need to prick up their ears if told about a ‘right’ method, or, just as suspiciously, about the ‘impossibility’ of another. What is needed is a careful ‘loss and gain’ analysis of specific techniques as well as sources in order to determine their potential.⁵

Starting with methodological observations, a fundamental tension inherent in the ‘Lessons’ is the attempt to invest findings of a very localized nature with national significance. Atypically for the ‘particularist’ approach, wide-ranging conclusions are offered on the basis of a mere three parishes from London and Bristol, at a time when

England was overwhelmingly rural. While explicitly acknowledged as a weakness of the argument, it does not seem to merit further reflection.⁶

Arguments from ‘silence’, invoking crucial but unrecorded activities, provide a second cause for concern. Once the reliability of a particular source is fundamentally questioned, only two options really present themselves. Either, a postmodern reading of the documents as random examples of self-referential texts, allowing at best historical discourse analysis, but no real insights into the ‘realities’ of parish life; or, a more pedestrian and necessarily cautious approach, suggesting plausibilities – derived from transparent methodology – rather than stark assertions. All the more so, as the issues at stake involve the use of much circumstantial evidence. The former is clearly not the road embarked on by the ‘Lessons’, and rather than pursuing the latter, some absolute verdicts are offered, e.g. the inadequacy of the metaphor ‘chief executive’ for the office of churchwarden (329). Such conclusions seem to rest on a belief in archival empiricism and the author’s ability to assess evidence ‘objectively’. Both, of course, are highly contested notions in our discipline.

Third, quantitative methods do not recommend themselves for their own sake or as sinister instruments to confirm preconceived ideas, but as means to an end, i.e. descriptive tools to clarify the content of serial records. It would be absurd to ban this approach altogether, as so many crucial judgements (‘more’, ‘less’, ‘bigger’, ‘smaller’) directly depend on it.⁷ Medieval sources are clearly not ideal objects for statistical investigation, but neither should an irrational fear of numbers block any attempt to make sense of the figures. At stake, therefore, is whether parish accounts are reliable enough to sustain wider conclusions based on elementary quantitative analysis.

First, however, what did parish government look like at the time? The fact that it was a complex system composed of several layers, located both within and without the community, is well established. Apart from reference to ecclesiastical, manorial and central authorities, there has been some debate, for instance, on the role of regional elites like the gentry, and the existence of a variety of local bodies such as ‘masters’ or ‘four men’ has been noted by parish historians.⁸ However, communities had not just one corporate face. As multifunctional bodies, they appeared in varying, sometimes overlapping configurations, depending on context, occasion and location. Apart from gathering as religious congregations, striving to achieve a ‘social miracle’ through rituals of Christian unity, and bickering amongst themselves in an infinite number of disputes, parishioners also appeared in political and administrative incarnations. With a view to clarifying certain features, analogies with parliamentary practice seem helpful for the former, comparisons with modern business organization for the latter.

Acting as a political unit, typically once a year to receive the accounts and make important decisions, parishioners participated in a number of different roles within a given spatial setting (usually the nave of the church). Beggars, marginal people, servants and maidens, if at all present, sat in the ‘gallery’ or on the periphery, essentially looking on and perhaps disrupting proceedings. The average male householder or widow, in contrast, formed part of the ‘backbenchers’ of the ‘parish assembly’, the community’s sovereign political institution. Backbenchers typically had the right to attend audits, a voice in elections and a chance to make first steps on the communal curtus honorum. Seated further forward in church were the ‘frontbenchers’, a smaller local elite defined by wealth or social distinctions. On top of disproportionate financial clout, they provided the recruitment base for ‘councils’, small inner cabinets emerging

in many communities. Known as the ‘masters’, ‘auditors’, ‘feoffees’ or the ‘[Four to Eight] Men’, the members remained (in theory) subject to the assembly. The ‘Lessons’ rightly point to the rector or vicar also playing a part, perhaps through offering advice, writing records, attending assemblies and holding one of the keys to the parish chest. At times, as in Morebath’s notorious dispute on the clerk’s wages in the 1530s, representatives of external authorities could be present as well.⁹ Inevitably, local peculiarities and specific situations led to variations from this ideal type, but it is a pattern emerging in many late medieval communities.

As administrative organizations, lay parish bodies were neither amorphous nor unfathomable, but fairly sophisticated and very roughly comparable to microscopic business ‘groups’. At the heart, the main communal unit ran central affairs (canonical duties and localized add-ons) as a kind of ‘holding company’, with links to a number of affiliated ‘daughters’ or associated ‘partners’, be it chapels, stocks or lights providing more specialized services on the periphery. Sometimes the latter operated entirely separately (chapels of ease in distant hamlets), sometimes they routinely reported to the centre (stocks in many Devon parishes) and sometimes particular duties were ‘outsourced’ altogether (e.g. rent collection in major towns). Members of the group, furthermore, entered into ‘joint ventures’ with otherwise independent local bodies such as major guilds or chantries, perhaps to allow liturgical and administrative ‘synergies’ (as in the case of the Halleway chantry at All Saints) or to fund a major investment (e.g. the spire at Louth built with help from parochial guilds). Mutual relations between the various units followed the principle of ‘subsidiarity’, i.e. wardens of one institution would call on others in case of need (typically a financial emergency), while seeing no reason to encroach on areas adequately covered by their colleagues (e.g. with regard to

the staging of church ales).¹⁰ Thus, to take a case highlighted in the ‘Lessons’, a relatively ‘inactive’ main communal body like that at St Andrew Hubbard in London (as reflected in the parish accounts) did not preclude a more elaborate ritual life (as revealed in inventories), for much could be done by ‘daughters’, associates and individual parishioners. Far from undermining accounts or precluding analysis, however, such a pattern sheds important light on the relative strength of communal, corporate and individual initiative in a particular locality.

One further business analogy, the use of ‘chief executive’ for the office of churchwarden, has met with particular censure (‘Lessons’, 329). It is clearly problematic to borrow terminology from another period and an entirely different context. Ultimately, the phrase cannot be more than an interesting analogy, but it does encapsulate the wardens’ position rather neatly. ‘Back seat drivers’, ‘proctors’, ‘overseers’ or ‘foremen’ (‘Lessons’, 318, 329) do not seem particularly helpful alternatives. Furthermore, some of the criticism suggests that the role of an executive has been misunderstood. Churchwardens implemented communal policy, staged events, hired labourers, purchased ornaments and supervised subordinate parish employees. Like executives, therefore, they were in charge of the ordinary, everyday affairs of their organization, but equally like their modern counterparts, wardens were not at the top of the hierarchy and not in control of all partners or associates. Supreme power rested, ultimately, in the ‘shareholders’ (‘the whole body of the parish’) and, for most practical purposes, the ‘board’ (i.e. the council of masters or feoffees familiar from the political context). Strategic decisions were taken at this level. Awkward as it may sound, business analogy conveys something of the complexity and flexibility of late medieval parochial administration.

Moving to the reliability of churchwardens' accounts for reflecting 'communal' activities, constraints of space impose a rather cursory survey. First of all it should be noted that critical analysis of the source does not have to start from scratch.¹¹

Inconsistencies in coverage, arithmetical mistakes, biases in survival, topographical differences and the peculiar blend of oral and written elements are but some of the themes in relevant studies, none of which, it may be noted, questions accounts as radically as the 'Lessons'.¹²

The only way to tackle the problems is to try and collect as much information as possible about the raison d'être, compilation and auditing of parish accounts. In what follows, a two-step procedure will be adopted. Step one consists of two 'case studies', or – more precisely – jigsaw-puzzles assembled to illustrate accounting procedures in a hypothetical town and a hypothetical village. Step two then addresses some variables affecting our judgement of specific sources. The case studies are narratives composed of mosaic stones found in particular localities, laying claim not to universal applicability, but a certain plausibility. They do not attempt to reduce the complexity of individual situations and factors to just two types, although in some important respects English parishes did cluster around two distinct regimes.¹³ Given that few archives are as copious as those quarried for the 'Lessons', a degree of collation is inevitable for a reconstruction of accounting processes in most local communities. The point is to illustrate 'how it could have been' in many parishes, based on components appearing repeatedly in the sources.¹⁴

For 'case study' number one, therefore, let us visit the borough of Market Albion, a relatively prosperous provincial town nestling around a church of St Mary's. At its annual audit on Candlemas

1500, John Taylor, a local mercer, was elected churchwarden by ‘the hole parisshe’.¹⁵ All householders had to attend the assembly,¹⁶ but the accounts were approved summarily, as customarily inspected by ‘worthy’ parishioners in advance.¹⁷ Ticks, dots and abacus marks thus appeared all over audited reckonings.¹⁸ After the assembly, the parish ‘masters’ summoned the old and new officers for the handover.¹⁹ John Taylor was to serve under Richard Smith as the junior warden.²⁰ The senior officer for the year ended passed over the balance of cash in his hands.²¹ Roughly equal parts went to the new set of wardens and the parish’s ‘tresor cofer’,²² opened with three different keys kept by Sir Robert, the rector; ‘Master’ William, a wealthy merchant; and the senior warden.²³ The parish clerk, acting as parochial scribe,²⁴ recorded the distribution of the balance in a memorandum at the foot of the accounts.²⁵ Then Richard turned to John for a word of advice. ‘An ordinance in our church book requires wardens to make a full reckoning every year on pain of a fine,²⁶ so we must be careful with the money. Here is a small paper book to note all your income and expenses.²⁷ Furthermore, keep all bills and receipts as evidence to attach to the account.²⁸ We will meet up at regular intervals during the year to check how matters stand.²⁹ Don’t worry about the clerk, he looks after himself.³⁰ Before I forget, let me introduce you to Gilbert, the man in charge of our lands and tenements.³¹ He has a list of rents to gather each quarter, with total proceeds entered into the accounts.³² But now let us join the masters for our audit dinner at the New Inn.’³³

Not long after Candlemas, the archdeacon visited St Mary’s. Richard and John were summoned to report on Sir Robert and parish affairs.³⁴ First, however, John had to swear his oath of office.³⁵ ‘John’, the archdeacon said gravely, ‘remember that the Holy Church expects wardens to render faithful accounts.³⁶ I hope I won’t have to shame you with public penance like one of your predecessors!’³⁷ Later on in the year, Master William chose the day of his father’s obit to announce a plan to rebuild St Mary’s south aisle. As it contained a side altar with a light maintained by the guild merchant, he was confident of raising most money privately without undue demands on parish funds.³⁸ The plan, and a one-off communal collection, would have to be approved by the masters and the whole parish.³⁹ When it came to the compilation of accounts before the next audit, the clerk asked the wardens for a top-up of his wages, as collections had failed to yield the customary amount.⁴⁰ This was granted and duly added to the reckoning, which the clerk now collated from the wardens’ two paper books. Gilbert, the rent collector, was in attendance to hand over his proceeds, but also reported shortfalls for

a shop in the High Street. The clerk grumbled, as this meant another item to add to the arrears.⁴¹ Two days before Candlemas, the masters bent over the parchment roll with the neatly written account.⁴² William, ever scrupulous, noticed that the receipt tag for the Good Friday collection was missing and disallowed an item for a conduit as it had been paid by somebody else.⁴³ At the same time, he agreed to raise the matter of outstanding rents with the town council.⁴⁴ On Candlemas itself, the audit went by the book.⁴⁵ The parishioners discharged the senior warden, approved William's plan for the aisle and agreed to allow one collection for the project next year. Yet more memoranda to add for the clerk!⁴⁶

Some miles away in our second 'case study', the village of Cattleton, local churchwarden Nicholas felt nervous. It was time for him, too, to make his annual reckoning, but on the latest count he actually had 6 s. 8 d. too much!⁴⁷ However, as there was no 'paper book' recording his transactions, the reason could not be discovered. John, a literate parishioner, helped him to write the draft account on a loose sheet of paper.⁴⁸ The only slip of evidence to consult was a summary of the money gathered at the lightwardens' ale.⁴⁹ The parish audit here was a rather livelier occasion than over in Market Albion. Sir Henry, the vicar, read out a long series of statements from each parish stock before moving to the main communal account.⁵⁰ Having just completed the section on 'gifts', a voice shouted: 'What about my late mother's bequest?' Now the penny dropped: Nicholas had forgotten the 6 s. 8 d. received from the widow's executors shortly after he took office. Sir Henry glanced at Nicholas disapprovingly, then carried on. Later that day back at the vicarage, the priest copied the loose sheet into the church book started when coming to Cattleton, correcting one or two scribal errors as he went along.⁵¹

What, if anything, can these pieces of historical fiction show? A romanticised view of conscientious parishioners? Perhaps, but also the existence of different regimes with a number of checks and balances inspiring some confidence: oaths of office and ecclesiastical supervision, punishment of negligent officers, parish ordinances regulating wardens' duties and audits (in many rural parishes involving a public

rehearsal), notebooks to record transactions, processes of checking draft reckonings, attachment of bills and receipts, scrupulous arrears management (including distraints, legal proceedings and the periodic waiving of ‘desperate debts’⁵²). Would all of this be needed for accounts serving mainly symbolic or commemorative purposes? Would, to take an extreme example, Morebath have felt obliged to include something as delicate as a payment in support of a military rebellion?⁵³ Undoubtedly, there was scope for fraud, human error and the perennial problem of faulty arithmetic, although in English parishes the latter is hardly alarming.⁵⁴ Furthermore, lack of consistency in format and detail, or – to the contrary – striking regularity of presentation, both highlighted by the ‘Lessons’ (316) as causes for concern, should not be taken to suggest unreliable coverage. The former reflects the system’s sensitivity to personnel and/or administrative changes, and the latter is only superficially standardized. If wardens used ‘forms’, arranging rent rolls or accounts in a set fashion over a number of years, they did so for convenience and out of experience rather than to feign an idealized order. Year in and year out, these same documents accommodated variety and divergence, recording ‘nil’ under certain headings, mirroring idiosyncratic fundraising situations and including ‘memoranda’ whenever appropriate.⁵⁵ Reassuringly, the world of parish accounting was well ordered, but never static. The wardens’ ordinary financial transactions on behalf of the parish community are highly likely to feature in the accounts.

The adjectives ‘financial’ and ‘ordinary’ are important. Unpaid voluntary services, offered with a view to good works or out of genuinely altruistic motives, are evidently not recorded in parish accounts. Much of the musical and ceremonial provision on major feast days may have been of this nature. Furthermore, extraordinary projects like church rebuilding called for special efforts and often resulted in separate records.

Several examples of ‘emergencies’ or large-scale initiatives are highlighted in the ‘Lessons’; more emerge in other parish studies.⁵⁶ Occasionally, details survive even for those (as in the case of the church house built at St Ewen’s, Bristol, from 1493, or the construction work on the porch and chantry chapel at North Petherwin, Cornwall, overseen by the Eight Men in 1505-7 and 1518-24⁵⁷), but many were not strictly ‘communal’ initiatives – like Master William’s rebuilding project at Market Albion - and thus beyond the scope of wardens’ accounts. The same is true for lights and chantries, unless they were parochial foundations or formally placed under parish control.

There seems to be only one grey area, namely collections and payments concerning the parish clerk, which were canonical duties incumbent on the lay community. The sources are sometimes silent, nurturing suspicions that a regular financial engagement went partially unrecorded.⁵⁸ But how much remains hidden? In an urban environment, a full salary may have been in the region of £4 p.a.; in a rural parish like Morebath perhaps £1 in cash plus casual fees and benefits in kind, the latter raising the possibility that clerks in larger parishes may have depended on fees alone.⁵⁹ In any case, wages have to be placed in the context of recorded total incomes of approximately £12 p.a. at Andrew Hubbard and £8 at Morebath. If fundraising for the clerk were entirely absent from an account, therefore, a notable – but never dominant – proportion of ‘communal’ finance might be absent. In both examples, however, there is sufficient information in the surviving records to reconstruct what was going on. Finally, the relationship between the wardens’ resources and those stored in the parish chest corresponded to that between a current and a deposit account.⁶⁰ The latter could be accessed for loans or special needs (usually duly recorded⁶¹), but not for everyday transactions.

Yet, proceeding to step two, historians are well advised to approach each fresh set of sources without preconceptions. Consideration of certain formal and contextual variables can help to arrive at informed judgements. From a formal point of view, what has survived in the archives is extremely heterogeneous. The spectrum ranges from isolated scraps of paper to ambitious artefacts like the church book of All Saints, Bristol, or the decades of running parish commentary by Sir Christopher Trychay for Morebath. The latter, effectively parish archives or constitutions rather than mere ‘bokes of a cowntis’, are not the first choice for quantitative analysis (although most of them will in fact do). Modifications, selections and copying errors are all possibilities. The best scenario is to work from audited final accounts, incorporating adjustments during the various phases of compilation and scrutiny. The parchment rolls of St Botolph Aldersgate, London, come close to meeting these criteria. A situation as at St Michael Spurriergate, York, where detailed ‘daily’ income and expenditure accounts survive alongside ‘clean’ final copies, provides another solid basis.⁶²

From the point of view of context, parish regimes relying mainly on the ‘living’ were particularly participatory and transparent. Where communal income depended on church ales, collections, gifts and other active fundraising by the parishioners, as at Cattleton, collective awareness of financial transactions was very high, and – in case of irregularities – a challenge from the congregation at the audit disproportionately likely. Such regimes tended to dominate in rural areas and smaller market towns, and thus in the overwhelming majority of English parishes.⁶³ Yet even in communities more strongly supported by the ‘dead’, i.e. the revenues from landed bequests in return for commemoration, parishioners knew that the churchwardens administered their money, their common stock.⁶⁴ Powers exercised by the masters, secretive deathbed

arrangements and out-sourcing of certain activities made corporate scrutiny more difficult, but negligent officers and elites were challenged nevertheless.⁶⁵

Yet further confirmation of the reliability of the sources is the fact that they mirror macro-historical trends known to affect English parishes during the period. Tudor local government reforms vastly increased the secular responsibilities of the office of churchwarden and the emphasis of their accounts duly changes over the course of the sixteenth century.⁶⁶ The various reformations, meanwhile, depended on sustained campaigns of enforcement, not least through visitations of the localities. Again, the effect emerges crystal clear from the sources.⁶⁷ At the same time, overseers of the poor and of the highways started to operate alongside the churchwardens, while the religious and social divisions of the country put parochial coherence to the test. The complexity of parish affairs now derived from a new local matrix.⁶⁸

The 'Lessons' reveal an instinctive distrust of theories, above all, curiously, of Swiss origin.⁶⁹ But is there such a thing as a 'neutral' agenda? Ronald Hutton's scrutiny of parish accounts may well have been motivated by a desire to question certain 'myths' associated with folk traditions, while The Shaping of a Community explicitly acknowledges the influence of Peter Blicke's views on the empowering potential of communal organization.⁷⁰ This is not the place to engage with 'communalism' in any detail, but perhaps an opportunity to address certain misconceptions. Blicke's model reflects specific socio-economic conditions in areas of what is now south-western Germany (rather than Switzerland). Here, late medieval changes associated with the demise of demesne farming and the subsequent need for greater neighbourly cooperation prompted the formation of strong villages and towns, both with

institutionalized powers of administration, legislation and jurisdiction. The nature and evolution of English parishes was fundamentally different, and the concept cannot simply be transferred to fit their situation. For Blickle, in fact, English parishes possessed no communal qualities at all!⁷¹ Adopting less stringent definitions, however, The Shaping of a Community postulated a more general process of ‘communalization’ throughout much of late medieval Europe, arguing that comparable phenomena like local territorial organization and growing evidence for quasi-corporate lay activities could have ecclesiastical as well as socio-economic roots.⁷² The ‘Lessons’, meanwhile, continue their author’s sustained campaign for the pre-eminence of Purgatory in late medieval spirituality and the need to revise the ‘orthodoxy’ of grass-roots discontent with parish religion.⁷³ All of these pathways, however, are perfectly legitimate approaches to the ultimate goal of a multidimensional understanding of the parish. ‘Objective’ findings, if at all conceivable, are most likely to result from a combination of scholarly perspectives.

It is to be hoped that the ‘Lessons’ spark a wider debate on the nature and reliability of churchwardens’ accounts and the structures of parish government. While addressing legitimate issues and pinpointing difficult problems, the argument is often speculative and the conclusions extreme. This brief response advocates methodological pluralism and differentiated judgements. In parish studies, as elsewhere, the ‘breadth’ of comparative approaches can help to contextualize the ‘depth’ of individual case studies. Tudor Parliaments would not have chosen parishes as basic units of local government if they had lacked any structural coherence. One key consideration, however, is the object of scholarly enquiry. Churchwardens’ accounts offer an almost complete record of the monetary transactions of the main parish office and they are reliable guides to the

overwhelming part of ordinary 'communal' transactions, but they cannot provide a histoire totale of parish activities in a wider sense. Parish government, in turn, was indeed complex, but varied in structures and processes depending on whether we examine it from a religious, political or administrative perspective.

University of Warwick

BEAT KÜMIN

I am grateful to John Craig, Ken Farnhill, Andrew Foster, Katherine French, Peter Marshall and Arnd Reitemeier for the discussion of issues tackled in this essay. ‘CWA’ stands for ‘churchwardens’ accounts’.

¹ ‘Pre-Reformation CWA and Parish Government: Lessons from London and Bristol’, ante, cxvii. 471 (2002), 306-32.

² B. Kümin, The Shaping of a Community: The Rise & Reformation of the English Parish c. 1400-1560 (Aldershot, 1996). ‘Community’ is defined as a ‘geographically defined religious and social unit with certain collective responsibilities’ and the capability to ‘be represented as a quasi-corporate body’. ‘Churchwardens’ accounts’, in turn, are judged to ‘reflect the financial responsibilities of the main parochial officers in a particular local context’ and to provide ‘an insight into a very large proportion of everyday communal activities’: ibid., pp. 2, 99, 101.

³ Extensive use of CWA e.g. in E. Duffy, The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England c. 1400- c. 1580 (New Haven, 1992).

⁴ K. Farnhill, Guilds and the Parish Community in Late Medieval East Anglia, c. 1470-1550 (Woodbridge, 2001), esp. pp. 102, 115 (potential limits of CWA); G. Fouquet, ‘Rechnungswesen im späten Mittelalter – Zusammenfassung’ [http://online-media.uni-marburg.de/ma_geschichte/computatio/Kiel-2001/Kiel-2001-Fouquet.html] (consulted 11 June 2002)], emphasizes the cultural ‘otherness’ of medieval accounting.

⁵ Wills e.g. have been subjected to very extensive scrutiny. In spite of many problems, however, systematic – even quantitative – approaches remain possible: C. Litzenberger, The English Reformation and the Laity: Gloucestershire 1540-80 (Cambridge, 1997), esp. appendix A (sources and methodology).

⁶ ‘Lessons’, 311. The relationship between individualizing and generalizing knowledge is highly problematic: G. Levi, ‘On Microhistory’, in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, ed. P. Burke (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 93-113, esp. 109-10.

⁷ Even the ‘Lessons’ rely on such comparisons all the time. St Mary-at-Hill e.g. is classed as a ‘wealthy parish, deriving the greater part of its income from property endowments; All Saints, Bristol, had more mixed economy’: ‘Lessons’, n. 23.

⁸ See C. Carpenter, ‘The Religion of the Gentry in Fifteenth-Century England’, in: England in the Fifteenth Century, ed. D. Williams (Woodbridge, 1987), pp. 53-74, esp. 66. References to parish ‘councils’ e.g. in R. Whiting, The Blind Devotion of the People: Popular Religion and the English Reformation (Cambridge, 1989), p. 91.

⁹ E. Duffy, The Voices of Morebath: Reformation and Rebellion in an English Village (New Haven, 2001), pp. 55-64. This model of parish government, sketched in The Shaping of a Community, ch. 6.2, is elaborated in B. Kūmin, “‘By all the Whole Body of the Parish’”. Entscheidungsfindung in der englischen Kirchgemeinde 1500-1550, in Gemeinde, Reformation und Widerstand, ed. H. R. Schmidt et al. (Tübingen, 1998), pp. 85-102.

¹⁰ For Louth see The First Churchwardens’ Book of Louth 1500-24, ed. R. Dudding (Oxford, 1941), p. xiv; for emergency access to parochial light funds: The CWA of St Michael, Spurriergate, York, 1518-1548, ed. C. Webb (York, 1997), pp. 4-5; lightmen organized parish ales at Yatton in Somerset.

¹¹ ‘We await a critical appraisal of this evidence’ (‘Lessons’, 311).

¹² ‘The surviving pre-Reformation accounts may fairly be described as full and detailed’: The Church Book of St Ewen’s, Bristol, 1454-1584, ed. B. Masters and E. Ralph (Bristol, 1967), p. xxiii; ‘the records should not be dismissed too quickly as

flawed’: G. G. Gibbs, ‘Parish finance and the urban community in London 1450-1620’ (Ph.D. University of Virginia, 1990), p. 43; see also A. Foster, ‘CWA of early modern England and Wales: some problems to note, but much to be gained’, in The Parish in English Life 1400-1600, ed. K. French et al. (Manchester, 1997), pp. 74-93; and K. French, The People of the Parish: Community Life in a Late Medieval English Diocese (Philadelphia, 2001), ch. 2 (based on her Ph.D. thesis of 1993). Most recently, the issues raised by the ‘Lessons’ have been critically evaluated in Duffy, Morebath, 20-4.

¹³ Ironically, the ‘Lessons’ effectively undermine this particular insight once firmly supported by Dr Burgess (and derived from explicit quantitative comparison!): C. Burgess and B. Kümin, ‘Penitential Bequests and Parish Regimes in Late Medieval England’, Journal of Ecclesiastical History, xliv (1993), 610-630.

¹⁴ Unless otherwise stated, the sources of information are the respective CWA (full bibliographical details in The Shaping of a Community). Most components could be substantiated with multiple references.

¹⁵ Peterborough 1546.

¹⁶ St Botolph Aldersgate, London, 1494-5.

¹⁷ Thame 1513.

¹⁸ CWA Michael Spurriergate, p. 21.

¹⁹ St Edmund, Salisbury, *passim*.

²⁰ A common ‘phased’ system documented e.g. at Thame from 1496.

²¹ Balance ‘brought in to the church’: Botolph Aldersgate 1547-8.

²² All Saints, Bristol, 1519, 1527 etc.

²³ ‘The Regulations of the Vestry of St Stephen [Bristol] 1524’, ed. F. Fox, Proceedings of the Clifton Antiquarian Club, i (1884-88), 202.

-
- ²⁴ Yatton 1543-4.
- ²⁵ Ashburton 1524-5.
- ²⁶ Lambeth 1505.
- ²⁷ Mary-at-Hill, London, p. xiv.
- ²⁸ Botolph Aldersgate 1518-19.
- ²⁹ CWA Michael Spurriergate, p. 5.
- ³⁰ Botolph Aldersgate, 1487-8.
- ³¹ Botolph Aldersgate 1511-12.
- ³² All Saints, Bristol, 1488-90 (rent rolls and CWA).
- ³³ All Saints, Bristol, 1551-2.
- ³⁴ The Early CWA of Hampshire, ed. J. Williams (Winchester, 1913), p. xli.
- ³⁵ ‘Juraverunt ... fidelem compotum reddere cum fuerint legitime requisti’: visitation of Stanwick in 1464, cited in Acts of Chapter of the Collegiate Church of Ripon 1452-1506, ed. J. Fowler (Durham, 1875), p. 223.
- ³⁶ E.g. Statutes of Exeter II, 1287, cited in ‘Lessons’, n. 31.
- ³⁷ Cf. a case from 1520 cited in C. Harper-Bill, The Pre-Reformation Church in England 1400-1530 (London, 1989), p. 104.
- ³⁸ Examples for guild support of building campaigns in Duffy, Stripping of the Altars, p. 146.
- ³⁹ Major projects required broad consensus: see the dispute over a silver cross at Tavistock: Select Cases in the Court of Requests 1497-1569, ed. I. Leadam (London, 1898), pp. 17-29.
- ⁴⁰ Boxford 1554-5.
- ⁴¹ Ashburton 1491-2.

⁴² Parchment used at Botolph Aldersgate.

⁴³ All Saints, Bristol, 1539-40.

⁴⁴ CWA Michael Spurriergate, p. 155 (1533).

⁴⁵ Procedural details in an ordinance printed in ‘St Stephen [Bristol] 1524’, 199.

⁴⁶ Cf. the memoranda appended to CWA of Ashburton 1479-1580, ed. A. Hanham (Torquay, 1970), pp. 193-4.

⁴⁷ £3, ‘received in the past years and not accounted for’, emerge in Ashburton 1538-9.

⁴⁸ John Thurbane, a former lightwarden, wrote at Yatton in the 1460s. The Boxford wardens bought loose sheets of paper: Boxford CWA 1530-61, ed. P. Northeast (Woodbridge, 1982), p. xi.

⁴⁹ The Yatton ales were organized by the ‘lightmen’ of the eastern and western parts of the parish.

⁵⁰ For public rehearsal and oral communication affecting CWA (‘creating a drama about the previous year’) cf. French, People, esp. p. 60.

⁵¹ Like Sir Christopher Trychay at Morebath: Duffy, Morebath.

⁵² CWA Michael Spurriergate, pp. 1-4.

⁵³ Duffy, Morebath, pp. 134-41.

⁵⁴ In the overall income analysis tables for a sample of ten case studies, yielding an aggregate picture of all surviving pre-1560 accounts for a particular parish, the maximum by which the average ‘wardens’ total’ diverges from the ‘actual’ total (based on a fresh calculation of all individual items) is 8.8 per cent (at Yatton in rural Somerset), with a mere 0–3 per cent in the other nine sets: Kūmin, Shaping of a Community, appendix 3.

⁵⁵ Cf. the scrupulous adjustments to ‘ideal’ parish rentals at CWA Michael Spurriergate, p. 14.

⁵⁶ Farnhill, Parish Community, p. 102; J. Middleton-Stewart, Inward Purity and Outward Splendour: Death and Remembrance in the Deanery of Dunwich, Suffolk, 1370-1547 (Woodbridge, 2001), p. 105.

⁵⁷ Church Book, pp. 11-24; C. Johns with J. Mattingly and C. Thorpe, St Paternus’ Church, North Petherwin, Cornwall: An Archaeological Watching Brief (Cornwall County Council, 1996), appendices 2-3. I am grateful to Dr Mattingly for drawing my attention to the latter example.

⁵⁸ Kümin, Shaping of a Community, pp. 100-1.

⁵⁹ The Andrew Hubbard CWA 1552-4 record a ‘whole year’s wages’ as £4 6s. 8d.: The Church Records of St. Andrew Hubbard, Eastcheap, c. 1450-1570, ed. C. Burgess (London, 1999), p. 172. Duffy, Morebath, pp. 62-3.

⁶⁰ The respective balances occasionally appear at audits: Ashburton 1524-5.

⁶¹ At Boxford from 1547.

⁶² CWA Michael Spurriergate, p. 14.

⁶³ Burgess and Kümin, ‘Parish Regimes’.

⁶⁴ Lambeth CWA 1504-1645, ed. C. Drew (London, 1941), i. xii-xiii. ‘The corporate nature of parish finances meant that the accounts represented and recorded the shared contributions of parishioners that became manifest in the church and its liturgy’: French, People, p. 47.

⁶⁵ See the Tavistock dispute cited above.

⁶⁶ Ashburton shows ‘a striking change of emphasis in the accounts’: CWA, p. x.

⁶⁷ 'It is particularly noticeable in the accounts that payments to the summoner and archdeacon, seldom if ever encountered in the accounts before the Reformation, become commonplace in the reigns of Edward and Elizabeth': C. Burgess, 'London Parishioners in Times of Change: St Andrew Hubbard, Eastcheap, c. 1450-1570', Journal of Ecclesiastical History, liii (2002), 38-63, esp. 57, n. 82.

⁶⁸ J. S. Craig, 'Co-operation and Initiatives: Elizabethan Churchwardens and the Parish Accounts of Mildenhall', Social History, xviii (1993), 357-80; K. Wrightson, 'The Politics of the Parish in Early Modern England', in The Experience of Authority in Early Modern England, ed. P. Griffiths et al. (Basingstoke, 1996), pp. 10-46.

⁶⁹ 'Lessons', 309-10. This echoes Oliver Cromwell's fear of subversive ideas radiating from the small Alpine republic, when he suspected that the Levellers 'wanted to break up England into a federation of self-governing cantons like Switzerland': cited in B. Manning, The English People and the English Revolution (2nd edn, London, 1991), p. 394. As an apparently relevant point ('Lessons', n. 17), it should be reported that Switzerland has now joined the United Nations.

⁷⁰ R. Hutton, The Rise and Fall of Merry England. The Ritual Year 1400-1700 (Oxford, 1994); Kümin, Shaping of a Community, p. ix.

⁷¹ P. Blickle, 'Communalism as an Organizational Principle between Medieval and Modern Times', in: idem, From the Communal Reformation to the Revolution of the Common Man (Leiden, 1998), pp. 1-15; more specifically on England: Kommunalismus: Skizzen einer gesellschaftlichen Organisationsform (Munich, 2000), ii. 108-20.

⁷² Kümin, Shaping of a Community, 'Epilogue'.

⁷³ ‘[W]hile interpreters of the period have attached considerable significance to the influence exercised by the sacrament of the Mass, ... the sacrament of penance played, if anything, a more formative role in shaping men’s priorities and actions’: C. Burgess, “‘A Fond Thing Vainly Invented’’: An Essay on Purgatory and Pious Motive in Later Medieval England’, in *Parish, Church and People*, ed. S. Wright (London, 1988), pp. 56-84, esp. 59; ‘The Reformation clearly had no lineage as a widespread movement “from below”’: ‘Lessons’, 306.