PERPETUAL CHANTRIES
IN BRITAIN
The chapel of the Giffard chantry at Boyton
PERPETUAL CHANTRIES IN BRITAIN

BY

K.L.WOOD-LEGH

Fellow of Lucy Cavendish College, Cambridge

BASED ON THE BIRKBECK LECTURES

1954–5

CAMBRIDGE
AT THE UNIVERSITY PRESS
1965
OMNIBUS AMICIS ET
BENEFACTORIBUS MEIS
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PLATES
The chapel of the Giffard chantry at Boyton  frontispiece
The chantry priest’s house at Trent  facing page 236
PREFACE

There is a close affinity between medieval chantries, at least in some of their temporal aspects, and the lectureships established in our universities by private benefactors. For chantries were not infrequently made to serve educational purposes, and they were always intended to perpetuate the memory of those for whom they had been founded. Hence the invitation to deliver the Birkbeck Lectures in the academical year 1954–5 seemed to offer a particularly appropriate occasion for the first detailed study in English of the chantry as an institution.

The subject is one which has been slow to find favour with modern historians. This is perhaps natural, for chantries are not among the expressions of medieval religion for which modern people feel instinctive sympathy or even interest: they lack the idealism of the monastic movements, the romance of the crusades and even the practical relevance to living issues of such matters as the growth of the parochial system. Moreover, the speed and thoroughness with which in England and other Protestant countries they could be suppressed when once those in authority had ceased to believe in them, and the growing indifference towards them in countries where they survived longer, have led historians to underestimate their importance in medieval life. It must be added also that there is a superficial sameness in many of the records relating to chantries which encourages the illusion of their being fundamentally all so very much alike that anyone attempting to study them in detail would learn little of value beyond the same few facts which the most cursory examination suffices to establish. Consequently, most historians, especially those of our own country, have been content to dismiss the chantries in a few paragraphs, often mainly devoted to the fate of their endowments at the Reformation, leaving the endless and seemingly trivial details of individual foundations to the genealogist and the antiquary with a taste for the picturesque.

It was in Germany that the chantries first attracted the attention of serious historians. There, within the last fifty years,
Preface

Several candidates for the Ph.D. degree have made useful investigations of those in some particular town or diocese within that country, and still more valuable studies of certain aspects of their history have come from such mature scholars as the late Professors Alfred Schulze and Karl Frölich.

To the work of these historians my own interest in the subject is due, since at the beginning of my preoccupation with ecclesiastical history I fully shared the general assumption as to the extent to which chantries could safely be neglected; and I should probably never have questioned it had not my friend, Professor Edmund Stengel of the University of Marburg, drawn my attention to some of their writings, particularly to the work of his own pupil, Dr Emma Katz.¹ Such studies at once revealed the possibilities of the subject and thereby seemed almost to demand that a similar examination of the records concerning the chantries in Britain should be undertaken.

My original intention was to include all Britain in the survey, but a little time spent in trying to investigate the Welsh chantries convinced me that the extant records concerning them were too few to form the basis of a useful study. This judgement is, to a great extent, confirmed by Professor Glanmor Williams, who in his recent history of the Welsh Church points out that our principal source for them is the chantry certificates, and also remarks that they were largely confined to those areas where English influence was strong.²

It was far otherwise when I sought to inquire concerning the chantries in Scotland. The records of the towns and churches of that country yielded an unexpectedly rich harvest, showing that chantries flourished there in surprisingly large numbers. Moreover, they resembled and differed from those in England in so many ways as to make them the ideal second in a comparative study. Even so, English sources are both more abundant and far more varied; for Scotland has no chantry certificates, and no episcopal registers to preserve evidence of day-to-day administration. If, in the following pages, therefore, English chantries seem to receive more than their fair share of attention, this is due to the disparity in the records of the two countries.

¹ Mittelalterliche Altarbrüder der Diözese Bremen im Gebiet westlich der Elbe.
² The Welsh Church from Conquest to Reformation, pp. 288–95.
PREFACE

In deciding what to include in this study, I have largely followed the example of my German predecessors. This was inevitable at the beginning of my investigations and I have continued to be guided by them because the more intimately I came to know the material relating to chantries, the more I have concurred in their choice. I have almost entirely ignored the host of temporary chantries for which medieval wills provided, since their ephemeral character rendered unnecessary the elaborate measures required to establish the perpetual chantries.

Again, like the German historians, I have tried to keep as closely as possible to what really concerned the chantries. Consequently, some institutions usually associated with them have received little attention. Guilds and fraternities, for example, have been mentioned only cursorily. For though they hired chaplains for themselves, and administered the affairs of many chantries, there was little that was distinctive in their way of doing these things and to have studied them in detail would have been a diversion from the main subject. After some deliberation I have decided to omit also the schools, alms-houses and other charities which were often attached to chantries, since the connexion seems to have been due to motives of economy or administrative convenience, both the chantries and the various sorts of charities being well able to prosper independently.

In concerning myself with chantries within a wide area geographically I have departed from the practice of other investigators and have thereby encountered some dangers from which they were free. For though this is a book in which local detail abounds, it is introduced not for its own sake but to illustrate some more general point. In treating my material in this way, I have almost certainly failed to notice local chronological developments or points of difference between one part of the country and another. But I have taken this risk in the belief that what was needed in the present state of our knowledge was a reasonably clear map showing the main features of the subject and its place in medieval life. If it can stimulate further exploration through which others will be able to correct the outline or fill in details, it will have fulfilled its purpose.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

That this book can now be published is due in large measure to the help and encouragement which at every stage I have received from many of those friends and benefactors to whom it is dedicated. A generous award from the Leverhulme Research Trust both increased my leisure for study and made possible long visits to repositories of records in many parts of the country to explore essential manuscript sources. The invitation of the Master and Fellows of Trinity College, Cambridge, to deliver the Birkbeck Lectures in the academical year 1954–5 provided the ideal opportunity to expend the views to which my researches had led.

Professor E. Stengel has followed my investigations with generous interest, asking questions and offering comments which have usefully increased my awareness of the similarities and contrasts to be found on the Continent. The Rev. J. C. Dickinson read an early draft of the book and offered a number of helpful suggestions. I am indebted to the Rev. Professor E. C. Ratcliffe for the generosity with which he placed his vast liturgical knowledge at my disposal. Professor S. J. Bailey has similarly assisted with advice and information on the legal points with which I have been concerned. Throughout the writing of the book, Professor C. R. Cheney has given generous help both in discussing all sorts of historical problems, and in such practical ways as procuring microfilms and helping to check quotations from manuscripts.

The collection of material was greatly facilitated by those who had in their keeping the records I wished to examine. I am especially grateful to Mrs J. Varley, the County Archivist of Lincoln, for much kindness while I was working in her office and for checking a number of quotations when the book was in proof. I wish also to acknowledge the kindness of Mr Innes N. Ware, the Diocesan Registrar of York, who, before the opening of St Anthony's Hall, repeatedly made room for me in his own office, at what must have been considerable inconvenience to himself. A number of advanced students who have successively
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

acted as my research secretary have been of great assistance in the search for material and especially in transcribing manuscript sources. In this connexion, I wish especially to thank Miss Ursula Bruck, Frau Helga Peters, Mrs L. Challenger, Mrs Christine Pye, and Fräulein Elisabeth and Fräulein Christina Gagel. To Mrs M. Strich and Fräulein R. Hertel I am indebted for much help in correcting the proofs. To Mr A. S. Bell of the Historical Manuscripts Commission I am grateful for constant help in all the more wearisome tasks which the production of a book of this sort entails; he has checked innumerable references, read the proofs, and given invaluable assistance with the bibliography and index.

I wish to thank Canon R. D. Richardson, D.D., Rector of Boyton, for the photograph of the Giffard Chantry in that church, and Mr W. A. Pantin, for the two views of the chantry priest’s house at Trent.

Finally, my thanks are due to the Syndics of the Cambridge University Press for their decision to publish the book and to those members of the staff who have been in any way concerned with it for all that they have done in its interest.

K.L.W.-L.