PART ONE

RITUAL REQUIREMENTS

CHAPTER 1

DEFINING THE SPACES: SCREENS

TYPES, FUNCTIONS

On the eve of its reform, the interior of the English parish church was normally divided into a number of spaces by a variety of screens. The most conspicuous was the rood screen, which extended across the west end of the chancel. Its primary role was as a barrier, both physical and symbolic, between the chancel and the nave. The chancel was the church's eastern arm; it accommodated the high altar, the priest and his assistants, and possibly the lay patron of the benefice. The nave was its western arm, and housed the congregation. By excluding most of the laity from the chancel, and by distancing it spatially from the high altar, the rood screen thus emphasized the elevated status of the priest and the exalted nature of the mass. In the 1540s the screen-protected chancel would be described as the part of the church 'where poor men durst not presume to come'.[1] [*Locations: 1, XI*]

Additional functions were fulfilled by this screen. It visibly defined the area which the rector rather than the parish was obliged to maintain. Sometimes, too, it acted as a reredos – an ornamental background – for the secondary altars located in the nave. Such usage is evident at Nether Compton and Peterchurch, where parts of altars have survived before the screen. Similar arrangements are indicated by the marks on the screen panels at Strumpshaw, by the wings to the screen at Ranworth, and by the adjacent piscinas at Wenham Parva and elsewhere. Normally, moreover, the rood screen supplied structural support for the gallery above it. It thus raised this rood loft into prominence, and ensured its visibility to layfolk in the nave below. In most cases, finally, it displayed a range of painted pictures. These expressed the devotion of the parish to God and the saints, and

1 Rood screen: painted panels, windows, cornice. *Ashton (Devon)*.

probably assisted the priest in his instruction of the people.[2] [*Loft support and paintings: V*]

Different roles were played by other types of screen. At Lavenham, Dennington and elsewhere, parcloses separated chancels from adjacent aisles and demarcated the areas devoted to chantries or other private services. They served also to protect the secondary altars from desecration by man or beast, and to advertise (by heraldry or inscription) the identity of the chapel's owner – a matter of both spiritual and social importance to the family or fraternity concerned.[3] [*Chapel screen: 2*]

How did the protestants view such structures? To the more moderate a chancel screen remained in principle legitimate. Elizabeth I regarded it as essential for decency and order in public worship. The Elizabethan churchman Richard Hooker similarly supported the retention of 'but one partition' in each church – 'for local distinction', he explained, 'between the clergy and the rest'. In Charles I's reign, and especially under Archbishop Laud, the sacerdotal tendencies of many clerics would ensure their insistence on such a screen, with 'a decent strong door . . . with lock and key, to keep out boys, girls or irreverent men and women'.[4]

On the other hand, even moderate protestants usually opposed the rood screen's traditional usage as a reredos for altars, a support for the rood loft and a display area for religious pictures. Their stance reflected a theological rejection of mass, of images and of pictures of God and the saints. The more radical, moreover, regarded the chancel screen itself as a potent symbol of media-torial priesthood, and therefore incompatible with the worship and ministry of a reformed church. In 1577 the Essex clergyman William Harrison dismissed such a furnishing as now 'altogether needless – since the minister saith his service commonly in the body [i.e. nave] of the church, with his face toward the people'. The distinction between nave and chancel, sneered the anti-puritan Richard Bancroft at about the same date, 'doth greatly offend the tender consciences (forsooth) of the "purer" part of the reformers'. Similar hostility was directed against the traditional parcloses, which were regarded as tainted by their association with catholic fraternities and masses for the dead.[5]

PRODUCTION, STRUCTURE

Of the screens to be seen in parish churches in 1530 a substantial number were rel-atively new. These testify not only to the continuing willingness of many craftsmen to create the apparatus required by traditional religion, but also to the continuing readiness of many parochial communities and individual donors to invest their money in it. Inscriptions, initials, badges and arms on the surviving examples

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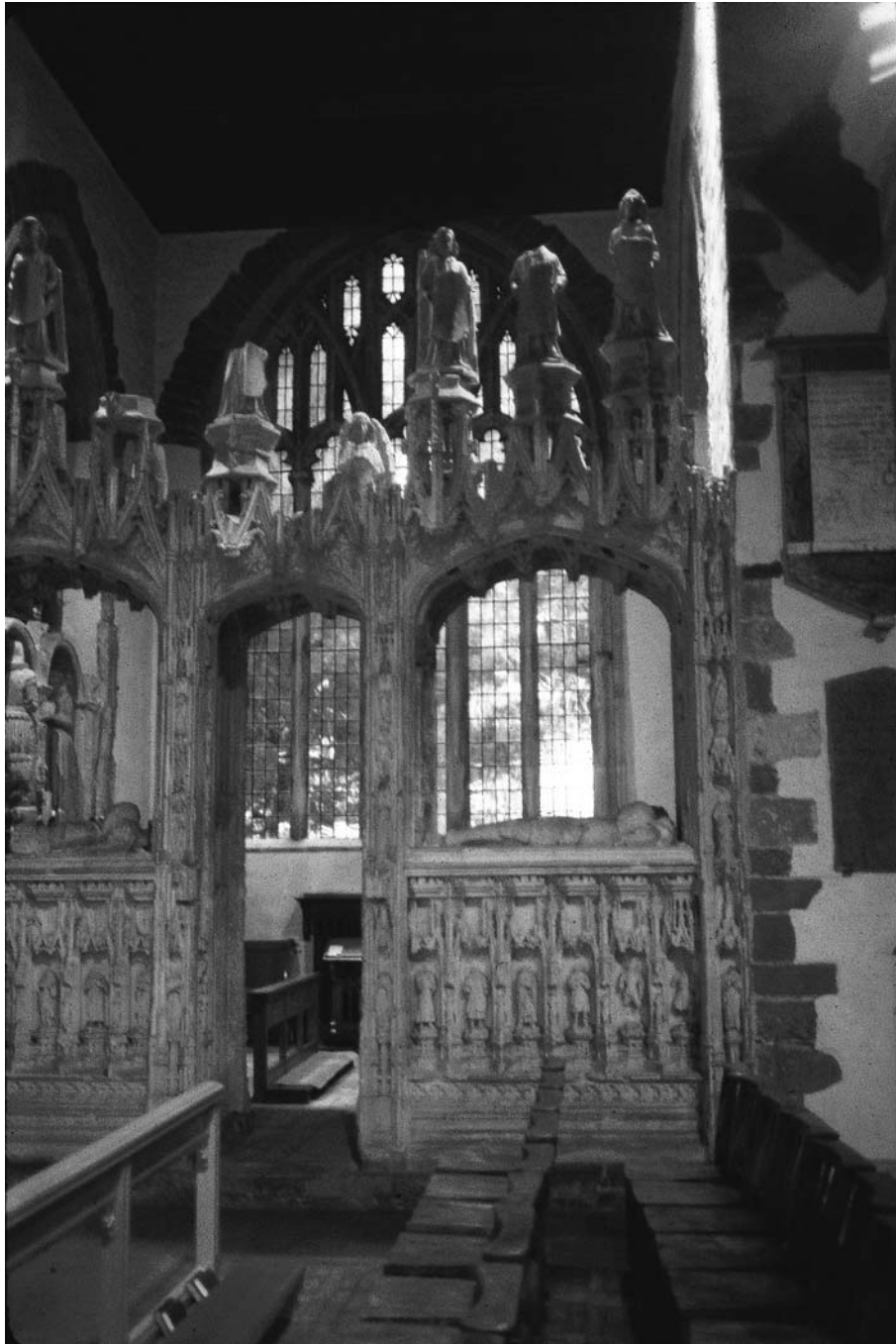
2 Chapel screen (stone): mutilated saint sculptures. *Paignton (Devon).*

combine with references in wills and churchwardens' accounts to prove the erection of at least twenty rood screens and five parcloses in the period 1500–29. The decade 1520–9 alone saw parcloses constructed at Ashburton, Paignton, Reading and Shropham, and rood screens at Almondbury, Banwell, Bradninch, Broadwood Widger, Fritton, Horsham St Faith, St Columb Minor and Shropham. At Ashburton in 1525–6 the work was supervised by the four churchwardens, John Brigg, Stephen Brigman, John Dolbeare and John Fairmouth. Substantial sums were paid to Peter Rowalling, the 'carver', and smaller amounts to labourers like Grey, Middleton and More, for carrying timber, breaking stone and cutting openings in the church wall. Such structures were financed either by the parish or by local donors. These included John Alblaster and his wife Benedicta at Worstead in 1512, and Thomas and Catherine Benny at Shropham in about 1528. On the other hand it is evident also that many early sixteenth-century parishes chose to retain an old screen instead of buying a new. These had survived occasionally from the thirteenth or fourteenth century, as at Stanton Harcourt, but more usually from the fifteenth, as at Alphington, Burnham Norton, Ludham, Poringland and Woodbridge – where the rood screens had all been erected in the period 1444–93.[6]

How was investment affected by the reformation? Profiles, putti, arabesques and other renaissance motifs suggest a construction date after 1530 for a number of the extant chancel screens, including Atherington, Holbeton, Lapford, Lustleigh, Marwood and St Levan, and for the parcloses at Orford, Oxborough, Tawstock and elsewhere. In addition, inscriptions and other evidence date parcloses at Stratton and St Matthew Ipswich to 1531 and 1539, and rood screens at Wellingham, Coddenham, Burlingham St Andrew, Throwleigh, Atherington, East Allington and Hubberholme to 1532, 1534, 1536, 1544, before 1545, 1547 and 1558. These were all financed by parishes, guilds or individuals – at Ipswich, for example, the parclose of 1539 was commissioned for its chapel by the guild of St Erasmus – and constructed by local or itinerant craftsmen. At Hubberholme in 1558 the rood screen was the work of 'William Take, carpenter'. At Aysgarth and elsewhere, moreover, screens appear to have been imported from neighbouring monasteries immediately after the dissolutions of 1536–40. The date evidence therefore suggests that production slumped soon after the accession of Edward VI and revived only weakly under Mary Tudor. Throughout England the once-revered structures were ceasing to attract investment.[7] [*Marian screen: 3*]

When production resumed it was at a lower level and in a more protestant form. The reigns of Elizabeth, James and Charles saw the construction of chancel screens without most of the traditional catholic features at Bridgwater, Croscombe,

3 Rood screen and rood loft (1558): vacant niches. *Hubberholme (Yorkshire).*

St John Leeds, Lydiard Tregoze, Morwenstow, Rodney Stoke and elsewhere, and of parcloses in several churches including St Margaret King's Lynn, Rose Ash and Yarnton. The Morwenstow example was erected in 1575, while that at Rodney Stoke was donated by Sir Edward Rodney in 1625.[8]

How did a new screen differ from an old? Both were normally of wood, especially oak. In most parishes the use of stone was prohibited by its cost, though pre-reformation exceptions included the chancel screen at Totnes and the sculpted screen to Paignton's Kirkham chapel. In terms of structure, on the other hand, the reform era would witness some significant alterations.[9] [*Wood: 1, 3; stone: 2*]

A pre-reformation rood screen consisted of three levels. The lowest was formed of solid panels, used normally for the exhibition of religious pictures. At Bignor, Cherry Hinton and elsewhere, the panels were pierced by apertures; these probably allowed kneeling children to view the ritual in the chancel. The middle level was a row of open and usually traceried windows. These, too, afforded parishioners in the nave a sight of the high altar, especially at the elevation of the host – the consecrated bread – by the priest at mass. *The Lay Folk's Mass Book* instructed the worshipper to 'hold up thine hands, and behold the elevation'; and Bishop Bonner, in Mary's reign, would regard failure to do so as evidence of heretical belief. The uppermost level consisted usually of a decorated breastsummer and cornice, and often of vaulting. This supported the rood loft, with its altars, images and organ. Doorways, in addition, allowed priests access to the chancel, while their lockable doors deterred intruders. Locks and keys for the 'choir door' featured often in churchwardens' accounts, and some screens (as at Patrington) retain original locks or bolts. Parcloses were generally similar in form, though usually less elaborate and unvaulted.[10] [*Structures: 1, 2, 5, V, XI; elevation of host: 4*]

In contrast, the post-reformation chancel screen invariably lacked a number of traditional elements. These included the panel apertures once used to view the elevation: among the last to be carved were those on the Llandinabo screen of about 1540. The new type of chancel screen omitted also the provision traditionally made for altars, for images and (above all) for lofts. Two of the last designed to support rood lofts were those erected at East Allington in 1547 – the year of Edward's accession – and at Hubberholme under Mary in 1558. In most cases, such as the mid-sixteenth-century examples at Holbeton and Lustleigh, the new structure was evidently never intended to bear a gallery. A projection was constructed at Washfield in 1624 but was purely ornamental. The craftsmen who produced such screens – and the parishes and donors who commissioned them – thus showed

4 Font: defaced panel, depicting priest elevating host at altar. *Little Walsingham (Norfolk).*

themselves willing to adapt to the requirements of the new religion.[11] [*Marian loft support: 3*]

PICTURES

More significant still were the changes in screen painting. The figures on the panels of a pre-reformation screen were sometimes its donors: John Bacon and his family, for instance, at Fritton in about 1520. At Portlemouth the benefactors were shown kneeling before Mary at her celestial coronation. Such paintings were designed to attract prayer on the donors' behalf, not only from the parishioners who viewed them but also from the saints depicted. Most figures, nevertheless, were of God or a saint. Their primary purposes were to express and to increase the devotion of parishioners to the 'holy company of heaven'.[12] [*Paintings: II*]

The trinity itself was sometimes portrayed – normally, as at Kenn, as an aged father with a crucified son and a dove-shaped spirit. Jesus appeared frequently as an infant, as at Buckland in the Moor, on the cross, as at Bradninch, or resurrected, as at Plymtree. At Plymtree he displayed his wounds and blessed the

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5 Pulpit (stone): saint figures in niches. *Bovey Tracey (Devon).*