The Reformation of the English Parish Church

In the sixteenth century, the people of England witnessed the physical transformation of their most valued buildings: their parish churches. This is the first ever full-scale investigation of the dramatic changes experienced by the English parish church during the English reformation. By drawing on a wealth of documentary evidence, including court records, wills and churchwardens' accounts, and by examining the material remains themselves – such as screens, fonts, paintings, monuments, windows and other artefacts – found in churches today, Robert Whiting reveals how, why and by whom these ancient buildings were transformed. He explores the reasons why catholics revered the artefacts found in churches as well as why these objects became the subject of protestant suspicion and hatred in subsequent years. This richly illustrated account sheds new light on the acts of destruction as well as the acts of creation that accompanied religious change over the course of the 'long' reformation.

ROBERT WHITING is Principal Lecturer in History at the University of York St John. His previous publications include *The Blind Devotion of the People* (1989) and *Local Responses to the English Reformation* (1998).

THE REFORMATION OF THE ENGLISH PARISH CHURCH

ROBERT WHITING

Principal Lecturer in History, The University of York St John

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521762861

First published 2010

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data
Whiting, Robert, 1949–
The reformation of the English parish church / Robert Whiting.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-521-76286-1
1. Church architecture – England. 2. Church buildings – England. 3. Church decoration and ornament – England. 4. Symbolism in architecture – England. 5. Architecture and society – England – History – 16th century. 6. England – Church history – 1485– I. Title.
NA5465.W49 2010
246′.950942 – dc22 2009054011

ISBN 978-0-521-76286-1 Hardback

In gratitude to Rowena, and to all the Whitings,
Atkinses, Girlings, Macgregors and Macleods;
in memory of my father and mother;
and in honour of Him for whom these churches stand.

CONTENTS

ILLUSTRATIONS

All photographs have been taken by the author and produced with the technical assistance of Mr Peter Layton. References to appropriate photographs are in bold type at the end of paragraphs.

BLACK AND WHITE PHOTOGRAPHS

COLOUR PLATES (found between pages 172 and 173)

INTRODUCTION

THE PRE-REFORMATION CHURCH

The year is 1530. King Henry VIII bears a title awarded personally by the pope: he is 'Defender of the Faith'. Apart from a minority of dissidents, the people of England remain similarly within the bounds of catholic christendom. And the indispensable centre of their communal life remains – as it has been since the Anglo-Saxon era – their parish church.

This building is situated normally towards the middle of its supporting settlement, though sometimes a different location has been dictated by a holy site or by an associated monastery or manor house. In accordance with the demographic and economic history of its parish it may be either extensive, compact or intermediate in size, and either ancient, new or a mixture of both in age. Almost always, nevertheless, its walls are constructed of local stone and its roofs of local timber. Invariably, too, its most spacious area is the nave, which occupies its western section; here, during services, the parishioners will stand, kneel or sit. Markedly smaller is the chancel at its eastern end. This is reserved for the clergy, and accommodates the most sacred rite of traditional religion: mass.

Nave and chancel are usually supplemented by auxiliary elements. Transepts may extend north and south from the main axis. Aisles, entered through rows of arches, may flank either nave or chancel, while chapels either project from the main plan or are contained within it. Transepts, aisles and chapels may all accommodate subsidiary masses, performed on behalf of particular individuals or of local guilds. South west of the nave there is usually a porch. This is used

for legal and commercial transactions as well as for parts of baptisms, marriages and processions; and sometimes it has an upper chamber, for storage, schooling or a priest's lodging. To the west of the nave, or sometimes elsewhere, there normally stands a substantial tower. It functions as a landmark, a communal status symbol and – by virtue of its height – an amplification device for the church bells. Encircling the entire building is the churchyard, bounded by a hedge or wall and entered through a lychgate. This area accommodates not only burials and processions but also revels, fairs and ales, for which reason it often contains a separate church house.

The church interior is divided physically by stone or wooden screens. These create a number of distinct spaces appropriate to the performance of the church's rites, especially the mass. The most important is the rood screen, which separates the sphere of the priest (the chancel) from that of his people (the nave). Its panels display pictures for the religious instruction and devotion of the parish. Less elaborate screens demarcate the chapels and other subsidiary elements of the plan. Within the screen-enclosed chancel and chapels stand altars of stone, upon which bread and wine are believed to be transformed miraculously by the priest. They are thought to become literally Christ's body and blood, and thus to re-enact his self-sacrifice for the sins of the world.

Towards the nave's west end stands the font. Here parents bring their newborn to receive baptism, which is believed to cleanse the child from its inherited sin and to incorporate it within the community of faith. Constructed of stone, and surmounted by a wooden cover, the font frequently bears sculpted figures of Jesus, the saints or the seven catholic sacraments.

Also to be seen within the parish church, and designed to facilitate and enhance the performance of its ceremonies, are its often-extensive collections of plate and cloth. The plate includes chalices, patens, pyxes, paxes, crosses and candlesticks; the cloth, a range of coloured vestments as well as banners for processions and covers for the altars and the font. They are accompanied by a variety of books and their supportive lecterns. Usually in Latin, these provide the priest with the words and gestures required for mass, baptism and numerous other traditional rites. Also associated with such rites are several types of receptacle. Shrines and reliquaries, for example, preserve the church's sacred relics. The sepulchre contains (at Easter) its consecrated bread, and the piscinas and stoups its consecrated water. There are also boxes, chests and cupboards to safeguard the most precious items of its ceremonial apparatus.

Screens, altars, fonts, plate, cloth, books and receptacles: these constitute the main ritual requirements of the parish church. Alongside these, however, a number of additional components are invariably to be found. Either in painted form on its walls or in stained glass in its windows, the church exhibits a range of highly coloured pictures. Portraying Jesus, Mary or saints, these are designed to instruct the minds and arouse the emotions of all who view them. Even more effective for these purposes are the three-dimensional images displayed in the most prominent locations, especially over the altars and on the gallery above the chancel screen. Through prayer, offering and pilgrimage, images are believed also to establish a personal contact between the individual and the powers of heaven. Often they are painted to look lifelike, and furnished with clothes and shoes as well as identificatory emblems.

In the pre-reformation church, religious experience is influenced not only by such visual stimuli but also by sound. Organs, situated normally in the rood loft, enhance the worship by accompanying the singing of the clergy and the choir. Full-size bells sound forth from the tower, and numerous smaller bells are rung around the church. These summon the parishioners to their communal worship, remind them to kneel at the climax of the mass, and stir them at funerals to pray for the dead. But there is power also in the human voice. This is heard not only in the priest's reciting of the liturgy but also in his preaching of the gospel and (more frequently) his public prayers for the souls of the departed. For these two purposes there is often a stone or wooden pulpit, adorned usually with religious figures, to the west of the chancel arch.

Around the interior are also various types of seat. In the chancel, sedilia and most stalls are reserved for priests. In the nave, the benches are occupied by the lay parishioners, and often bear religious carvings. The nave's west end might have also a separate seating gallery for the choirmen and musicians. Markedly different functions are performed by the gallery over the rood screen at the nave and chancel intersection. This rood loft sometimes bears altars, often supports an organ and usually displays a number of important images. In addition it provides parishioners with access to the rood, a large and highly venerated figure of the crucified Christ.

Nave, chancel, transepts, aisles and chapels invariably contain also a number of memorials. These might be incised slabs, engraved brasses or tomb chests with sculpted effigies. They not only commemorate the deceased but also issue appeals on his behalf – to God for mercy, to the saints for intercession and to viewers for prayer. These catholic functions of the memorial are usually reflected in the words and pictures to be seen upon it.

THE POST-REFORMATION CHURCH

The year is 1630. England has experienced a century of religious revolution. In some respects comparable to that occurring on the European mainland, in others it has proved specifically English. Initiated by Henry VIII in 1534–47, accelerated by Edward VI in 1547–53 and halted only briefly by Mary Tudor in 1553–8, reform has resumed thereafter under Elizabeth I and the early Stuarts. Charles I is now the supreme governor of an independent church of England, and his subjects – a small minority apart – are now overwhelmingly protestant in practice and belief. A substantial number of 'puritans' indeed seek even further reformation.

For most of England's men, women and children the primary focus of communal life remains their parish church. Its external form has probably experienced little growth: substantial church construction has long been rare. The condition of the fabric, however, may well have deteriorated, since benefactions and maintenance levels have generally declined. In addition, statues on the porch, tower and exterior walls have possibly been mutilated or removed. But far more striking than these external changes is the altered appearance of the church interior.

The rood screen, firstly, has often been wholly demolished or severely reduced, and its panel figures defaced or painted out. Similar blows have been dealt to many chapel screens. Even more conspicuous is the fate of altars. In the chancel, transepts, aisles and chapels the deposition of these once-revered structures has been virtually total. Some are paved into the church floor; most have been ejected and destroyed. The stone high altar has been replaced by a wooden table. This is modelled on domestic furniture, and can be moved near to the congregation at communion time. It accommodates a prayer book service which is simpler, non-miraculous and in English.

In most churches the font still stands at the west end of the nave. Its baptisms, however, are now in English and much simplified. Sometimes, moreover, it bears the marks of deliberate mutilation; and in some parishes it has in fact been removed and replaced by a plain metal basin. Even greater damage has been inflicted on the medieval plate and cloth. The once-extensive collections have been drastically depleted, not only by official confiscations but also by local sales and thefts. Any survivals have normally been converted to protestant purposes or secular use. Post-reformation equipment – the congregational communion cup, for example, or the ministerial surplice – is invariably plainer than its medieval counterpart.

Vanished also are the Latin service books. They have been replaced by English prayer books and psalters, and by an English bible displayed in the nave for public reading. Similar losses have been suffered by the receptacles that once contained relics, holy bread and holy water. Almost everywhere the shrines have been demolished and the reliquaries removed. Easter sepulchres, piscinas and stoups have often been attacked: all are redundant in this protestant world. Any remaining boxes, chests and cupboards now contain the books and apparatus required by the new service.

Whitewash has usually obliterated the wall paintings of Jesus and his saints. Many have been replaced by painted royal arms – the badge of the supreme governor – or by texts from the English bible, particularly the ten commandments. Rather more of the medieval figures survive in stained glass. Substantial numbers, nevertheless, have been defaced or destroyed; and any recent glass is almost always non-representational or white. Even more conspicuously absent are the three-dimensional images that formerly dominated the church interior: the great rood, and the figures of Mary and the saints. Almost all have been deposed, and most deliberately smashed or burned. All that remains usually are the empty niches or pedestals that once displayed them.

In situ still are some pre-reformation organs and many tower bells. Their use, however, has been reformed, the bells (for instance) now summoning parishioners to hear sermons rather than to pray for the dead. Many organs and bells, moreover, have been destroyed, and any replacements are protestant in function and form. Medieval pulpits, too, have often survived, but their prayers for the dead and other catholic usages have been everywhere suppressed. A considerable number of new pulpits have also been erected. They lack the traditional religious figurines, and feature innovations like the sounding-board.

Some seats, like the priests' sedilia, are now redundant and disused. Benches, in contrast, are of enhanced importance in sermon-centred services. Many new sets have been built, usually without the catholic figures of the old, and both the private pew and the seating gallery are now more common. The rood loft, however, has in most churches been either totally removed or savagely reduced. Any survivor has been stripped of its altars and images, and is used only for seating or for singers and musicians. Of the medieval memorials a substantial number have remained, but often their pictures and wording have been deliberately defaced. Traditional forms are omitted from the more recent, and increasingly are replaced by protestant inscriptions.

QUESTIONS, SOURCES

The transformation of the parish church must qualify as one of the most dramatic turning-points in English history. Less certain than its long-term significance, however, is its original reception by the English people. Was it generally welcomed and assisted in the parishes? Or was it in fact more often resented and obstructed? Was it (therefore) a relatively sudden and rapid alteration or a more gradual and extended process? And by what types of motive were these responses driven? Were men and women impelled primarily by their spiritual convictions, or by more secular considerations like their material interests, their political loyalties or even their physical fears?

The answers to these questions will have important implications for one of the most disputed issues in early modern history: the nature of the English reformation. In recent times the debate has been significantly advanced by studies of specific regions and localities. In the south and east, for example, Kent has been investigated by P. Clark, Suffolk by D. MacCulloch and the diocese of Lincoln by M. Bowker. In the north and west, Yorkshire has been examined by A. Dickens, Lancashire by C. Haigh, Gloucestershire by C. Litzenberger and Devon and Cornwall by the present author. Studies of particular towns and villages include London by S. Brigden, York by D. Palliser and Morebath by E. Duffy. In addition, nationwide analyses have been offered not only by Dickens, Duffy, Haigh and Whiting but also by N. Jones, C. Marsh, E. Shagan and several others. Two radically divergent interpretations have been proposed. In one view, the replacement of catholicism by protestantism was generally supported by the English population; its progress was therefore relatively fast. In the opposite view, this reformation was generally opposed; its advance was therefore relatively slow.[1]

These are the questions; where may answers be found? The sources of evidence are of two main types. The first consists of the material objects that may still be seen in England's parish churches. These include a substantial number of screens, altars, communion tables, fonts, wall paintings, glass windows, bells, pulpits, benches and memorials, together with other survivals in lesser quantities. Many have been personally examined by the present author, over more than four decades and in many hundreds of churches – throughout England, but most intensively in Yorkshire in the north, in Norfolk and Suffolk in the east and in Devon and Cornwall in the south west. This personal investigation has been supplemented by various species of published research. These include the county and parish inventories compiled by the incomparable N. Pevsner and his collaborators and

by a number of local specialists like Suffolk's H. Cautley. Equally valuable are the studies of specific topics by several generations of antiquaries, archaeologists and historians. Screens and rood lofts, for example, have been examined by F. Bond, B. Camm and A. Vallance. Fonts have been investigated by F. Bond and J. Wall, plate by C. Oman, cloth by A. Kendrick and Easter sepulchres by P. Sheingorn. Wall paintings have received the attention of A. Caiger-Smith, roof bosses of C. Cave and glass of P. Cowen, R. Marks, P. Nelson and C. Woodforde. Images have been the focus of R. Marks's scrutiny. Bells have been analysed by H. Walters, organs and pulpits by J. Cox and benches by Cox and J. Smith. Brasses are the subject of works by J. Bertram, M. Norris and R. Rex, memorial slabs by F. Greenhill and commemorative monuments by B. Kemp and N. Llewellyn. Iconoclasm of various types has been studied by M. Aston, T. Cooper, J. Phillips and J. Spraggon. The author's debts to these fellow labourers in the ecclesiological field will be evident in the following pages; they are here acknowledged with gratitude.[2]

Especially when dated by stylistic features or inscriptions, material objects of these types can yield significant evidence concerning the nature and timing of the church's transformation. They may indicate (for example) the scale of pre-reformation investment in a particular element of religious practice, and the pace of decline in such investment over subsequent decades. They may demonstrate also important changes over time in the form and ornamentation of a religious furnishing, or bear vivid witness to its mutilation. Memorial brasses, for instance, are informative in all these respects.

The other species of evidence consists of written documents. Those of an unofficial nature include letters and diaries as well as more formal tracts and chronicles. Examples are the chronicle kept in mid-Tudor London by an anonymous Franciscan friar, the tracts published there in Edward VI's reign by the young layman Philip Nichols, and the commonplace book compiled in Elizabethan Exeter by its citizen John Hooker. More official in nature are the documents produced by central, regional or local government. The first category includes parliamentary statutes, royal proclamations and state papers, records from courts like Chancery or Star Chamber, and the chantry certificates and church inventories compiled for the exchequer. The second type includes episcopal registers, visitation returns and ecclesiastical court books as well as diocesan-proved wills. Among the documents of local provenance, the most relevant are the financial accounts constructed annually for each parish by its churchwardens.[3]

Each document type can throw light on a church's experience of the reformation. Visitation returns, for instance, were compiled by parish officials in response to enquiries from the diocesan authorities. They may indicate the extent to which

catholic artefacts were removed from the churches under Edward VI, restored to them under Mary and then lost after Elizabeth's accession. They may show also the speed of such artefacts' destruction or conversion to secular use. Wills, when analysed in substantial numbers, can demonstrate the changing levels of individual investment in the different forms of ecclesiastical furniture. Above all, churchwardens' accounts make it possible to track their churches' expenditure on the acquisition, removal and destruction of religious objects. They may reveal (for instance) the extent to which parishes erected and embellished images before and after the hostile royal injunctions of 1538, or the speed with which they purchased and displayed an English bible after its official endorsement in the same year. They may similarly indicate the rate at which churches demolished their altars after the prohibition of such structures in 1550, or recovered their confiscated plate and vestments after 1553, or replaced their wall paintings with scripture texts after 1559. Sources both material and documentary can thus allow us to imaginatively recreate the interior appearance of the parish church on the eve of its reform, and to envisage the additions, subtractions and modifications that it experienced in the ensuing era of religious revolution.