INDULGENCES IN LATE MEDIEVAL ENGLAND

Indulgences played a major role in medieval 'strategies for eternity', easing the journey through Purgatory to Heaven after death. However, theological attacks during the Reformation and the subsequent Protestant rejection of indulgences have given them a poor reputation, compounding the effect of the fourteenth-century satires by Chaucer and Langland of the pardoners who ensured their widespread distribution. This book is the first study of indulgences in late medieval England and it offers an extensive and authoritative re-evaluation of their role in England's religious, social, and economic life between 1300 and the Reformation. R. N. Swanson traces their importance to devotional life, their contribution to charitable and economic structures, and the complex tale of their disappearance under Henry VIII. This is a major contribution to the religious history of late medieval England and will be essential reading for scholars of medieval history, religious studies, and the Reformation.

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Passports to Paradise?

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Preface

Books happen for many reasons. This one began by accident, as a paper for a postgraduate seminar at the University of East Anglia in 1996 which rapidly grew out of control. I soon became convinced that historians and commentators (myself included) had given far too little attention to pre-Reformation indulgences, and that they were in reality a highly important feature of late medieval English religious and social life. More and more primary material turned up; the hunt for sources became almost obsessional; sentences in the original paper grew into articles; and the list of possible further articles grew ever longer. There was only one way to break the chain: write the book.

This is not the last word on indulgences in late medieval England: there will be material, lurking unconsidered somewhere to change the interpretation, and from the experience of researching this volume, I know that just one reference can produce a seismic shift in understanding.[1] As archival catalogues increasingly become available on the internet (notably the A2A project for local record offices, and the catalogue of the National Archives), so more of the relevant documents become visible. Even so, catalogue entries and manuscript descriptions give only a rough guide to contents: chance details have often changed my ideas, or added new dimensions, which would not be revealed without consulting the original sources. One joy of the past few years has been the real sense of exploration and discovery, as I trawled through archives and manuscripts, never knowing quite what to expect, or what I would find. Once it was an unrecorded copy of

[1] One such shock occurred while proofing this volume. On a chance visit to the church of All Saints, North St., York, I realised that some fragments of text in one of the windows are actually remnants of a hitherto unrecognised indulgence inscription, probably associated with an image either of the mass of St Gregory, or of Christ as Man of Sorrows (for which see pp. 258–63). As far as I know, this is the only definite evidence that indulgences were include in English church windows. This immediately amends my statement about stained glass on p. 162, which could not be changed at that stage without considerable textual disruption.

a confessional letter printed by Caxton, but that was only one of several surprises.

Nor will I argue that this book offers a much-needed rehabilitation of medieval indulgences, after centuries of scorn or disregard – but it does argue for giving them greater prominence in understandings of pre-Reformation England. I certainly hope that some of the standard pre- and misconceptions will be challenged and overthrown; that those who acquired and accumulated indulgences in the 250 years or so before England experienced Reformation will not be dismissed as gullible dupes because they made indulgences part of their spiritual life and used them as part of their social cement; and that the vital contribution made by indulgences to the 'traditional religion' of pre-Reformation England will at last be recognised.

This is also where I should offer an apology. This is a big book, deliberately so. I originally planned something much shorter, in days when I blithely thought it would be a fairly straightforward book to write. The complexity of the issues, and the novelty of much of the evidence, convinced me that only a long book could deal adequately with the many facets of the topic which emerged as the work advanced. The thematic approach of the chapters means that some material is used repeatedly, and arguments overlap; to avoid excessive duplication in text and notes I have resorted to cross-references – but there are very many of them. I hope that this will not prove too inconvenient, and their number will be forgiven.

No book gets written without building up obligations. Diana Wood invited me to give the original paper at UEA, and repeatedly urged me to produce a book as my interest expanded. These days time to write at length is a rare and precious commodity in academic life. Solid writing began in 2002–3 during a period of university study leave, augmented by Research Leave funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Board. I then naively believed that a first draft would be completed by Easter 2003; I was soon disabused, as the enormity and complexity of the project became apparent. Once the leave was over, completion was delayed as teaching and administrative duties prevented anything other than slow progress. Although work never actually stopped (not quite), only the award of a British Academy/Leverhulme Trust Senior Research Fellowship for 2005–6 guaranteed the time and freedom from other responsibilities to allow the book to be completed. Equally important was the opportunity to hold an Agnes Gund and Daniel Shapiro Membership in the School of Historical Studies at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton from January to April 2006: the seclusion offered there allowed major redrafting to continue almost without inter-

ruption. The funding which supported that stay (some from the School of Historical Studies at Birmingham University) is gratefully acknowledged. Some of the early archival work was funded by a research grant from the Leverhulme Trust, when I expected the work on indulgences to be part of a rather different project; as a long-term accumulative endeavour it also draws on earlier work funded by the British Academy. The final stages of research were also facilitated by a grant from the Scouloudi Foundation in association with the Institute for Historical Research, which funded visits to record offices to consult material unearthed at the last moment, and paid for copies of additional documents.

Numerous record offices and libraries have been exploited for this project, as the bibliography shows. I thank all the archivists and librarians who have contributed to the work, especially those whose answers to emails and vague queries led me to unexpected documents which often plugged gaps. Many friends and colleagues have lent microfilms and photocopies, provided transcripts, and suggested useful manuscripts; others have generously offered advice, checked readings, and answered emails as I tried to clarify ideas and work out where I should be going – both physically and intellectually. For such assistance I particularly wish to thank Dominic Bellenger, Michael Bennett, Richard Britnell, Nigel Coulton, Ken Farnhill, Margaret Harvey, Judith Middleton-Stewart, Richard Mortimer, Veronica O'Mara, Alan Piper, Linda Rasmussen, Jens Röhrkasten, Alec Ryrie, the late Philip Snell, and Siegfried Wenzel – with profound apologies if anyone is omitted from the list. For secondary works I have relied primarily on the University Libraries at Cambridge and, especially, Birmingham. During the stay at Princeton, the Firestone Library at Princeton University proved especially useful, supplemented by the Speer Library of the Princeton Theological Seminary, and the resources of the Institute for Advanced Study. Some of the ideas developed here have been tried out in various forms over the years, on audiences in Norwich, York, London, Oxford, Birmingham, Hobart, Hong Kong, Durham NC, and UCSB.

While writing this book, I was also editing a volume of essays on indulgences in late medieval Europe, for publication by Brill (*Promissory Notes on the Treasury of Merits: Indulgences in Late Medieval Europe*, Leiden and Boston, MA, 2006). That offered a useful and valuable balance to this project's focus on England, and engaging with that volume concurrently was a considerable stimulus to the present book. An earlier version of part of what is here chapter 6 appeared as my own contribution to that volume of essays; I am grateful to Brill for permission to reuse it here.

As British academics struggle to avoid total suffocation by the demands of the modern university system, the readiness of colleagues to share in and relieve the burden is one of the few things which keeps us sane. I owe especial thanks to Steve Bassett for taking over as Head of Department at Birmingham during the whole of the academic year 2002–3, which allowed me both the time and the freedom from anxiety to find my feet with the project.

In these days of tight profit margins, publishers are reluctant to take on a large book like this. I am therefore extremely grateful to Michael Watson of Cambridge University Press for accepting the volume, and steering it through to publication. The two anonymous readers who wrote to support the project were gratifyingly encouraging. As might be expected, the readers identified weaknesses, and a few downright errors. I have not adopted all of the suggestions for improvement, but the book is certainly better for their comments and the rethinking they provoked.

There is finally, and as always, an immeasurable debt to my wife, Heather Swanson, who was as anxious and as determined as I was to ensure that the book be finished, and has been a valuable sounding board for ideas and a stimulating critic of my arguments. During the drafting her questions and comments repeatedly made me rethink points which I had thought unproblematic, or had not fully appreciated. Her suggestions for changes to the text (having read a complete draft) greatly improved the book and clarified the arguments. She is the only person qualified to grant me plenary remission for the way she has had to live with this book as it has developed over far too many years. This is for her: I hope it is, as one might say, satisfactory.

The text of this volume was submitted to the Press in December 2006. February 2007 was the cruellest of months. Whatever achievement there is in this book, for me any sense of achievement is diminished by the knowledge that two people in particular will not see the final product.

Marjorie E. Swanson
10 February 1922–15 February 2007

Kathleen G. McDouall
10 February 1917–25 February 2007

Abbreviations

BIA	York, Borthwick Institute for Archives
BL	London, British Library
Bodley	Oxford, Bodleian Library
CPL	W. H. Bliss, J. A. Twemlow, M. J. Haren, and A. P. Fuller, eds., *Calendar of Entries in the Papal Registers Relating to Great Britain and Ireland: Papal Letters*, in progress (London and Dublin, 1893–)
CUL	Cambridge University Library
L&P	J. S. Brewer, J. Gairdner, and R. H. Brodie, eds., *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of the Reign of Henry VIII*, 23 vols. in 38 (London, 1862–1932)
LAO	Lincoln, Lincolnshire Archives Office
Reg.	*Register/Registrum*
RO	Record Office
SS	Surtees Society
TNA	London (Kew), The National Archives
WSA	Chippenham, Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre, Wiltshire and Swindon Archives
YCA	York City Archives
YMA	York Minster Archives

Quotations and citations

Quotations from Latin works in the main text are usually translated into English, except for brief tags whose meaning should be self-evident. Quotations in the notes are generally left in Latin. Extracts from Middle English works are more problematic. As their gist is fairly clear, even if not their precise meaning, they are not translated (apart from one rather murky case). This retains use of Þ/þ (pronounced 'th') and ȝ/ȝ (with pronunciations ranging from near silence in 'ȝif' to the equivalent of 'gh' in 'fight'). Middle English spellings tend to be phonetic, so however incomprehensible the text may look, it should sound more meaningful.

In the notes, citations of printed books are given with author and short-title (or short-title alone for anonymous works); full publication details are in the Bibliography. Printed broadsides and single-sheet indulgence-related documents are treated as manuscripts, cited by archive or library call-number, and listed in that section of the Bibliography.