

Some Norfolk Churches and their Old-time Benefactors

BY

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From a mass of notes jotted down at various times during the past few years, I would draw attention to certain items extracted from the wills of medieval Norfolk people which may be of interest to students of ecclesiastical matters in various parts of the county. Most of these details have been transcribed from the registers of the Prerogative Court of Canterbury, now preserved at Somerset House, though a few are from similar registers in the District Probate Registry at Norwich. The wills from which they have been extracted are, of course, storehouses of information respecting family and genealogical matters, as also with regard to the domestic and trade arrangements and customs of medieval Norfolk. But in this short paper I confine myself almost entirely to information respecting the fabric and fittings of a number of our Norfolk churches which has been gleaned during the perusal of some 300 wills, varying in date from early in the fifteenth century to the time of the Reformation.

The medieval will usually follows a more or less stereotyped pattern. After an invocation of the Holy Trinity comes the date on which the will was drawn up, the name of the testator, with his place of abode, and an indication as to his state of health—"sound in mind and body, and of perfect

understanding" usually, but sometimes less reassuring, as in the will of William Gillowe of Ryston in 1497, "sore vexed, and with seknes dredyng the unknowen tyme of dethe." [P.C.C. 15 Horne.]¹ This is followed almost invariably by a commendation of the soul to God's mercy—"I bequeath my soule to Almighty God, to our Lady Saint Mary, and to all the company of Heaven" is the usual form, with or without the addition of some special saint or "advow," as at Bawburgh in 1493, when Dr. Edmund Rightwis, whose brass still remains in the church, invokes in addition the protection of St. Michael and of that purely local saint, St. Walstan. [P.C.C. 28 Doggett.] Occasionally, however, the commendation is much fuller:—

I doo bequeth, gyve up or betake my soule into the hands of Almighty God, my lord and maker, and Jhesus Christ, my saviour and Redemer, and the Holy Goost, my Comfortour, my gujde and myn instructour . . . and my synnes I bequeth to the Devill, the prince of this worlde, whiche, thorowe Christ's merits towards me, *in me non habet quicquam*. [Thomas Grene, rector of Poringland 1445. P.C.C. 30 Pynnyng.]

Or

I doo commende my soule into the handis of Almighty God, Jhesus Criste our Saviour, that Redemed me and all makynde with and by his most dere and precious blode upon the crosse on Good Fridai, to the blissid Virgin Mary, his swete and most dere and welbelovyd mother, and to all the holy saynts, citezeins and companyes of Heven. [John Bastarde of Watlington, 1535. P.C.C. 32 Hogen.]

Immediately after this come directions as to burial.

In the last case:—

my most wretchid and vile filthe and stynking body, full of synne and corrupcion, to be buried, if it chauce or fortune me to departe this saide life in Watlyngton, then my wretchid bodye to be buried at the quyer dore under the whight stone there [with alternatives should he die at Lynn or in London].

¹The references are to the registers of wills proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury.

It is from these directions as to burial that we can often derive valuable information as to the existence and position of various images and altars in our churches:—

bifore thymage of our Lady in our Lady Chauncell in the church of Walsoken. [Thomas Honyter, priest, 1507. P.C.C. 10 Bennett.]

before the feet of the image of Saint Edmund. [Henry Bony, rector of St. Edmund's, Norwich, 1467. P.C.C. 20 Godyn.]

at the auter's ende afore the picture of oure blessed lady. [Edmund Jacob, rector of Warham, St. Mary Magdalene, 1496. P.C.C. 4 Horne.]

before the altar of Saint Katherine. [Thomas Jecson, Emneth, 1475. P.C.C. 20 Wattys.]

in the entering of the qwer of Martham be twene the deskys. [Robert Aleyn, vicar, 1487. P.C.C. 7 Milles.]

in the entrance of the chancel where the morning lessons are wont to be read. [Henry Kays, chaplain, Fakenham, 1426. P.C.C. 6 Luffenham.]

Not infrequently instructions are given for the provision of a tombstone:—

I will have a faire stone of marbill with a pyctur of the Holy Trinitie, and a preest with a chales in the same stone. [Hugh Haseley, clerk, Ellingham, 1530. P.C.C. 26 Jankyn.]

I will that my grave be made with stone a yarde above the grounde with a convenient gravestone, and further as myn executours shall devise. [Harry Hunston, Esq., Walpole St. Peter, 1534. P.C.C. 25 Hogen.]

a comely stone with a Scripture shewing the day of the month and yere of our Lord God at my departyng. [John Watson, rector of Holme Hale, 1557.]

After directions given with regard to burial, the next item is often a bequest of money to the mother church of the diocese. Usually this is quite a small sum, though occasionally, in the case of a rich man, a considerable amount is left, and our cathedrals must have benefited largely by these gifts of the faithful.

Bequests to our parish churches are many and varied, and it will be well to classify them somewhat.

First those which have to do with the fabric of the church itself, and very often valuable information as to the date of building may be gathered in this way. Usually the money is left in quite general terms, for the "reparations," i.e., the ordinary upkeep of the church, and as often as not it is quite a small sum. Occasionally, however, a particularly munificent gift occurs, as that of Roger Lestraunge, Esq., who in 1511 directed that £40 (equal to more than £1000 to-day) should be expended on his tomb and the "reparations" of the chancel of Hunstanton Church. [P.C.C. 21 Fetiplace.] Or that of Alice Payne, widow, who left £20 to Swaffham Church in 1547. [P.C.C. 26 Populwell.] Thomas Esthawe, Vicar of Thornham, in 1460 bequeathed £10 for the rebuilding of the north aisle of the church, and a further sum towards the rebuilding of the chapel of St. Walstan at Bawburgh. [P.C.C. 23 Stokton.] Sometimes there are conditions. Elizabeth Lady Spelman in 1556 left 40/- towards the upkeep of Narford Church, but the money was not to be spent all at once. It was to be

delyvered to the churche wardens, when nede shall requier, to amende and repayre any parte of the church roofe, and not before. [P.C.C. 5 Wrastley.]

In 1499 the roof of the chancel of St. Lawrence's Church, Norwich, was the subject of a substantial bequest, when John Jowell, alderman, left £20 "for the Ledyng of the Newe Chauncell." [P.C.C. 2 Moone.] In 1496 Sir Edmund Bedingfeld left £10 "to the ledyng of the church of Calcote" (Caldecote, now ruinous). [P.C.C. 7 Horne.] In 1536 Thomas Browne of Walsoken directed his executors to make "all the Southe Ile of Walsoken churche, from the west ende of ower Lades quer to the west ende of the same Ile to the porcon that it is now at [i.e., apparently to the portion that has already been built], in all things well and substancially, so that [i.e., on the condition that] they may have the olde leade, glasse, tymber and Iron of the same Ile." [P.C.C. 2 Dyngeley.]

Towers figure prominently in these bequests. In 1449 Nicholas Gryswell of Swaffham left 20/- to the building of the bell-tower at Cressingham, and 6/8 for a similar purpose at Little Dunham. [P.C.C. 28 Aleyn.] In 1495 Miles Walker, rector, bequeathed £3/6/8 for the building of the new tower of South Walsham St. Lawrence [P.C.C. 30 Vox], and four years later Walter Cooper of Terrington left

to the making of the newe stepul of the church of Saint Clement xl marc of lawful money, under condicion folowing, that the saide newe stepull be in hande and onwards with warkemen within ij yeres next ensuyng after my disease.

Failing this condition being carried out, the money it to be expended on

a suet of vestments for the auter of oure lady of white damoske, with lilly potts and Roses, imbrowdred with ave maria, that is to sey ij sensyng coopes, a messe coope, deken and subdeken. [P.C.C. 7 Moone.]

Bells are of constant occurrence. In 1421 Thomas Lovell bequeathed 20/- towards the making of new bells at St. Mary's, Barton Bendish [Norwich, 85 Hyrninge], and in 1508 Alexander Pynnes left 6/8 "to the makyng of the Vth bell" at East Dereham. [P.C.C. 7 Bennett.] In 1556 Thomas Darby of Walsoken directed:—

my executours shall delyver to the Churche wardens of Walsoken to the newe shotinge [re-casting] of the greate bell, xiijs. iiijd. [P.C.C. 4 Wrastley.]

And the fittings of the tower are not forgotten. In 1490 Thomas Boys of Emneth, gent., leaves to the church there 13/4 "and an abull tree for to planche the seller in the stepill," i.e., wood to make a floor in the upper story of the tower. [P.C.C. 21 Horne.]

John Forest, priest, of Hellesdon, in 1500 desires to be buried "in the newe yle w'in the church of seynt George of Colgate" (Norwich), and adds:—

I will have in the newe yle a wyndowe glased at my costs ther agaynst my body lyeth [P.C.C. 4 Adeane.]

With regard to the fittings of the church, from time to time useful information is forthcoming. In 1446

Peter Langwade, chaplain, of Beachamwell, left 40/- for the making of a new font in Gooderstone Church, and 20/- for the repair of the roodloft in the same church. [Norwich, 17 Aleyn.] In 1442 Simon Parche of Wallington bequeathed no less a sum than £16 for remaking the stalls in the church of the Black Friars at Lynn, where he desired to be buried. [Norwich, 214 Doke.] The Sepulchre, which in most churches was a moveable wooden structure erected temporarily at Easter, is sometimes mentioned, as at Sutton in 1504, when Robert Dengayn, rector, leaves 6/8 "to the reparations of the sepulchre of our Lord Jesus Christ." [P.C.C. 26 Holgrave.] And at Runcton Holme in 1416, when Edmund Habirgent, rector, bequeaths "a purple cloth for covering the sepulchre, and a fine linen cloth for wrapping the body of our Lord." [Norwich, 22 Hyrninge.]

Various images of the saints and their accompanying lights are of frequent occurrence. In 1527 Richard Carter gives 13 marks to West Walton Church, in order that the figure of St. George may be made "overthwart the high alye." [P.C.C. 23 Porch.] In 1529 Thomas Dereham, Esq., desires to be buried

byfore the Image of our blyssid Lady at the northe ende of the hyght autler in the Chauncell of Crimplesham. [P.C.C. 19 Jankyn.]

In 1504 John Toke of Walpole St. Peter charges his executors to cause the image of St. Stephen to be gilded at his costs and charges [P.C.C. 24 Holgrave], and in the same year John Leman, of the same parish, gives somewhat similar directions:—

I geve to the gilding of Seint Margaret xxvjs. viijd. I geve to bye a kyrtil and a cote of velvet to our lady and hir son in the parclose of the church, to be worn every good day, xiijs. iiijd. [P.C.C. 22 Holgrave.]

The number and names of such images in our churches is indicated by the "lights," of which mention is made so frequently in these medieval wills. As an instance we may refer to the will of Juliana Medel of Swaffham, dated 1422. She mentions the

following lights:—All Souls, St. John, St. James, St. Katherine, St. Mary Magdalene, St. Margaret, St. Christopher, St. Mary of Pity, St. Michael, the Holy Cross, and the Salutation, before all of which lights were burned at certain times. [Norwich, 106 Hyrninge.] Eleven lights are also mentioned in the will of Thomas Drewell of Outwell, 1514:—St. Clement, Corpus Christi, St. Anne, our Lady in the chapel of the Trinity, St. Thomas, St. John Baptist, St. Christopher, St. Katherine, St. Margaret, St. Nicholas, St. Erasmus. [P.C.C. 16 Hogen.]

Here is a list of the lights in Walsoken Church in 1507, as detailed in the will of Thomas Honyter, priest:—Lights of the Holy Trinity, the Assumption, St. Peter, St. Thomas, the Holy Rood, the Nativity, St. John Baptist, the Purification, St. Katherine, St. James, “the highe lamp,” and “the v candells of Jh'u”—twelve in all. [P.C.C. 10 Bennett.]

Gifts of plate are frequent, and sometimes of a very costly nature. Chalices occur among the bequests of Richard Bolton of Great Cressingham, 1415 [P.C.C. 32 Marche], Nicholas Blaunche, rector of Shingham, 1420 [Norwich, 70 Hyrninge], Richard Gybbes of Denver, 1420 [69 Hyrninge], Robert Aleyn, vicar of Martham 1487 [P.C.C. 7 Milles], and Edward Almer of Denton, 1532 [P.C.C. 20 Thower]. In 1473 Geoffrey Tolboth, gent., left silver plate weighing 75 ounces, together with “a cuppe silver and gilt standing, with a ymage of seint Katerine in the bottom,” with the price of which a chalice and a pair of cruets might be bought for Northwold Church. [P.C.C. 15 Wattys.]

At Wiggerhall, in 1518, William Elwyn left “two candlesticks of silver, a pax, two silver crewetts, and a shipp [for incense] to saint Germain churche [P.C.C. 8 Ayloff]; while at Fincham, in 1480, Lawrènce Fyncham directs his executors to buy

a peire of honest Sensours of silver of the value of xli. or mor, as the caas shall fall, and that they give the Sensours in my name to the parish church of saint Martin of Fyncham, their to serve to the honnour and laude of

God and his Saints as long as they may endure, to thentent that my soule may every Sunday in the pulpitt of the same church be recommended to 'the devout praiers of the parishners ther. [P.C.C. 3 Logge.]

In 1507 Thomas Honyter bequeaths to the church of Walsoken "a crosse of silver with a foote and a crosse staffe," i.e., a silver cross which could either be stood on the altar or mounted on a staff for processions. Henry Kays, chaplain, of Fakenham, in 1426 left a great cross of silver gilt to Norwich Cathedral. [P.C.C. 6 Luffenham.]

Other bequests of this nature are those of William Curtis, 1499:—

I wulle have bowte to the laude of God, and to be usid in the church of Nekton, a monstrans of silver and gilte to the summe of vj li. or x mark or more, to bere in the holy bylssed Sacrement upon Palmesonday, Corpus Christi day, and at other times to stand upon the hey Auter with ye blessed sacrament. [Norwich 79 Wryght]

In 1473 Thomas Jecson of Walsoken, chaplain, bequeathed "a monstrance or pix for the sacrament of the altar in Emneth church" [P.C.C. 20 Wattys]; and Richard Hicson, also of Walsoken, in 1496 left to the church of Walsoken:—

x marcs, with a crismatorye to the vont, and ther to Remyne everlasting in the worship of God. [P.C.C. 10 Horne.]

The last words are significant, for it was little more than fifty years later that this chrismatory, and most of these other bequests, were forcibly removed from the church's keeping, and to-day it is only through such stray references as occur in these wills that we know of their existence at all.

With regard to vestments, munificent gifts of these constantly occur. The cope to the value of £10 left to the church of Upwell by Alice Bewpre in 1490 [P.C.C. 38 Milles] must have been exceedingly magnificent, for a cope of "cloth of gold" bequeathed in 1415 to Great Cressingham Church by Richard Bolton [P.C.C. 32 Marche] was only valued at 40s. Od. Another exceptional gift is that of Hamund Haydok

of East Dereham, who in 1464 left 100/- to buy a special vestment according to the decision of the parishioners. [P.C.C. 12 Godyn.] In this respect it is well to remember that the word "vestment" in medieval times had a very elastic meaning. It often meant not only one particular vestment—the chasuble, for instance—but the whole of the eucharistic vestments together, what we should now call a *set* of vestments. Sometimes it meant still more and included not only the dress of the celebrant, but that of the deacon and sub-deacon as well. Occasionally it includes copes, and sometimes even altar hangings, if they were of the same stuff and colour. Consequently the large sum in the particular case (corresponding to some £150) may have been meant to cover a good deal.

Copes valued at 53/4 were left to the churches of Great Bircham, Anmer, and Great Ringstead by Sir Roger Le Straunge of Hunstanton in 1505, who also left £10 to Hunstanton Church for "a vestment of Crymsyn velvett," with a cope of the same material to match, but in this case "the owte side of my gowne of Crymsyn velvett" was to be used for the cope itself, his executors buying "an offerrez [orphrey] for the same of the value of x marcs or x li., that myn armys & wiffs to be enbrodered in the same." [P.C.C. 2 Adeane.] This was the second gift to Hunstanton Church of a cope of this description, for in 1496 Sir Robert Radcliffe had left to the church:—

my long gown of crymeson velvet, except the furre therin, to make therof a cope, and the orferas therof to be of cloth of golde, at myne owne costs and charges, with myne armes and dame Kateryne's armes, lately my wif, theruppon. [P.C.C. 23 Horne.]

Whether or not this was carried out at the time there is some doubt, in the face of the following reference in the will of Robert Lestraunge in 1511. He leaves to every parish in which he had lands and tenements to the yearly value of £13 6s. 8d.:—

a pair of vestments, with all thapparell, and with the armes of me and of my wife on the same. Also I will

that Sir Robert Radcliff's gowne of Crymesyn velwet be made in a Cope, and honestly made the orferis and embrowderynge on the same, with his and my mother's armes, and myn armes and my wif's. [P.C.C. 21 Fetiplace.]

The custom, which was not uncommon, of bequeathing one's clothing and household linen for church purposes is also illustrated in the will of John Bastarde, who in 1535 leaves to the high altar of Watlington Church "a corporas case to be made of a pece of clothe of tissue that my wife hathe" [P.C.C. 32 Hogen]; and in that of William Dyx, parson of Castle Rising, 1491, who bequeaths to the church:—

a table cloth of diaper to saint John's awter, and to every awter, as fer as my lynnyn will streche therto, an awter cloth. [i.e., as far as there is enough linen to go round.] [P.C.C. 3 Doggett.]

Some curious conditions are attached to a bequest, in 1501, of Robert Frende, a London merchant, to the parish church of "Straget" [Stradsett] where he was born. He directs that:—

a vestment with thappareil that longith to a preest to syng masse yn, be made of a cotte [coat] of crymsen and yellow velwett, as far as it will stretche, and myn executors to performe the same aftir their discrecon, and hit cost xls. more to make hit well. The cotte was Tremayll, of Caleis, and was myn, bought and sold iij yeres a gone by a bill of his owne hand, and ys yet in my house. I woll it serve for the same entente abovesaid, for he will never sett hit oute for the money that hit lyeth fore, v marke, no lesse. Yf that Tremayll will sett hit owte and pay his money, iij li. vjs. viijd. I am content that he have it, yet for all that his day ys soo fer past, and that the same money be bestowed to the same intent aforeseid, and the full xls. bifore rehersed be put to the same some of v marke to make hit well. [P.C.C. 19 Bennett.]

This is all rather mysterious, but seems to imply that Frende had, some three years previously, taken in pawn from Tremayll this crimson and yellow coat, on which he had advanced 5 marks (£3 6s. 8d.). Though the pledge was considerably overdue, and Frende was already looking upon it as a bad debt, yet he is ready for his executors to give Tremayll

another chance of redeeming the coat; but in any case his executors are to add a further 40/- and provide the vestment for the church, either using the gown "as far as it will stretch," or, in the event of its redemption, purchasing new cloth to the value of £3 6s. 8d.

An interesting bequest of surplices occurs in the will of Henry Marche, vicar of Sporle, in 1538:—

to Beeston churche the surples that was Maister Vicar of Swaffham. To Spurle churche the surples that ys yn the vestrye. To Tetelleshall churche the surples in my coffer. [P.C.C. 11 Crumwell.]

Altar cloths and frontals also occur as bequests. In 1503 Thomas Cooke, rector of Antingham St. Margaret, left to the altar of St. Thomas in North Walsham Church, "a cloth of red fyn worsted with braunches of gold sett ther upon, to hang befor ye seyde auter, and in ye mydd of ye clothe an Image of seynt Thomas." At St. Mary Coslany, Norwich, there is this bequest in the will of John Fraunces, citizen and mercer, 1499:—

I bequeth to the Trynite autler ij auter clothes of blue worsted redy made, of the which, one is for to hange upon the ovir parte of the saide auter, and the other clothe for the nether parte of the same autler. [P.C.C. 7 Moone.]

In 1504 Robert Skayman leaves to the church of North Creake "an autler clothe of crymsyn velvet." [P.C.C. 34 Holgrave.]

A few miscellaneous bequests in conclusion.

1. A reference to memorials in the *churchyard*, which at one time must have been plentiful, but which have now entirely disappeared.

I wille have at either end of my grave twoo substanciall Crosses of Tymber sett, and scripture made upon either Crosse for a remembraunce, to thentent that they that shall see or Rede the said scripture may praye for my soule. [John Clerk, North Wootton, 1543.] [P.C.C. 26 Spert.]

2. A pilgrimage to Rome.

I bequeth to John Porter, preste, x li. sterling, to thentent that the said Sir John shall goo to the hooly place of

Rome, of the whiche x li. the said Sir John shalhave x marc for his labor, and v marc of the said somme to be gevyne in the pope's werrys [wars]. [Simon Wyseman, Esq., Great Thornham, 1496] [P.C.C. 11 Horne.]

3. Masses at "Scala Celi." Henry Spilman of Narborough, 1496, leaves 20/- to be expended in masses at Scala Celi. [P.C.C. 3 Horne.] Sancta Maria Scala Celi is the circular church at Rome, said to be on the site of St. Paul's martyrdom. In it St. Bernard is related to have had a vision of the souls for whom he was saying mass ascending as by a ladder into heaven. The name was applied to a number of chapels and altars in England, which had special privileges granted them by the Pope. The church of the Austin Friars in Norwich was so privileged, and in this case the masses were probably intended to be said there.

4. The uncertainty of the times. Henry Marche, vicar of Sporle, 1538, leaves "to the Greye frears of Lynne, Babwell [Bury St. Edmunds] and Walsingham, to each of them vjs. viijd. *yf they stande.*" [P.C.C. 11 Crumwell.] This legacy could never have come into effect, for all these three Friaries were dissolved in 1538. In this case it is easy to understand the insertion of the qualifying note, but not so easy to grasp the reason of a similar qualification in the will of Edward Willoughby, Esq., of Denver, more than 30 years earlier, in 1504. He leaves:—

to the parson of Denver, to sing for me and for my frends by the space of a hoole yere, if the lawe will suffre it, viij marks. And if so be that the lawe will not suffre it, that then it shalbe lefull [lawful] to them that shalbe named for myn executours to chose and take an honest and able preest by theirre discretion to have the same service. [P.C.C. 25 Holgrave.]

The testator may have feared some infringement of Archbishop Edmund Rich's 8th constitution of 1236, touching bequests for "annals and trentals."