

Marking time?

A 15th-century liturgical calendar in the wall paintings of Pickering Parish Church

by Kate Giles

This article is concerned with the interpretation of a mid 15th-century cycle of wall paintings in the parish church of St Peter & St Paul, Pickering (Yorks). The iconography of the scheme is considered within the archaeological and architectural context of the parish church and it is suggested that the cycle was designed as a form of liturgical calendar. The article raises questions not only about our understanding of 15th-century wall paintings but also more generally about the interdisciplinary interpretation of medieval art, architecture and space.

This article looks at the interpretation of a cycle of 15th-century wall paintings in the parish church of Pickering, North Yorkshire. St Peter & St Paul, Pickering was a Saxon foundation. The earliest phases of the present building date to the 12th and 13th centuries, with substantial additions of the 14th and 15th centuries. In 1852 restoration work revealed a series of wall paintings on the north and south walls of the nave. Despite a local and national outcry, the paintings were subsequently whitewashed and only rediscovered and restored in 1876–78. The images within the cycle vary in scale and subject matter. Some occupy the full height of the wall, others are much smaller and form part of horizontally banded narrative scenes. They include popular saints such as George, Christopher, John the Baptist, Edmund, Thomas a Beckett and Catherine, narrative scenes from the Passion and the Death of the Virgin and moral subjects such as the Corporal Acts of Mercy. They have been dated on stylistic grounds to c1450. Although the basic structure and iconography of the scheme survived the 19th century, much of the original detail and pigment was destroyed by the whitewashing of 1852 and the restoration of 1876–78. This has meant that the cycle has been largely overlooked by art historians. This paper attempts to reassert the importance of the Pickering wall paintings in the light of an ongoing programme of archaeological research on the church. It seeks to explore not only the iconographic content of the scheme, but also the rigid disciplinary divisions between art history, architectural history and archaeology which often result in the interrelationship of medieval artistic decoration, architectural structure and social space being overlooked.

Architectural history

The earliest evidence for a church on the site is a fragment of an Anglo-Saxon cross shaft which lies in the south aisle

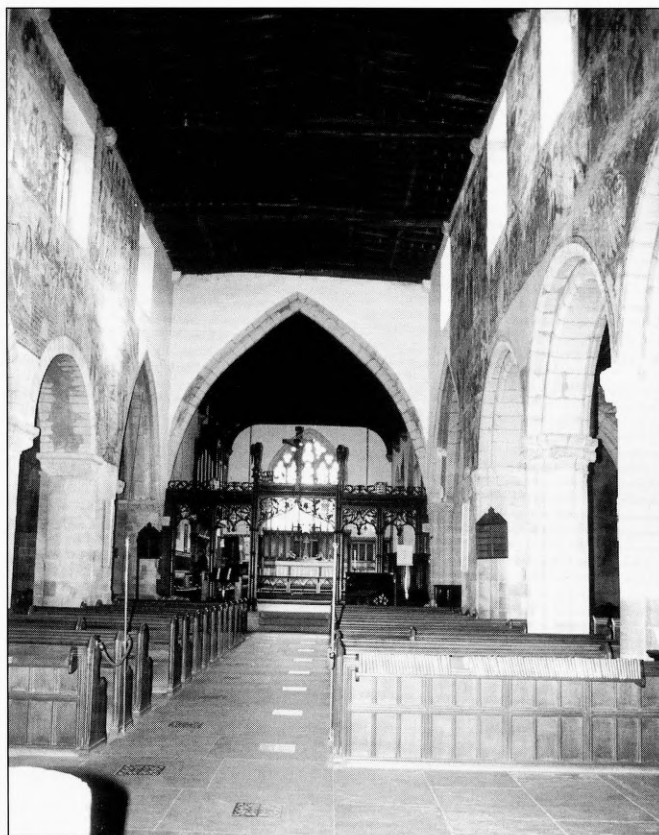


Fig 1 View of nave of St Peter & St Paul's church, looking east (Photo: K Giles)

of the nave and a stone 'belonging to a portal of indisputable Saxon date' uncovered during the restoration of the tower in 1876 (Lightfoot 1895, 355). However, the earliest surviving fabric within the church is the north arcade and its associated aisle which date to the early–mid 12th century (Fig 2). The south arcade and south aisle appear to date, on stylistic grounds, to c1190–1220 and the south transept arch and south-east transept to c1220. The 12th-century church may also have had transepts and a central tower (Ellis 1996, 3).

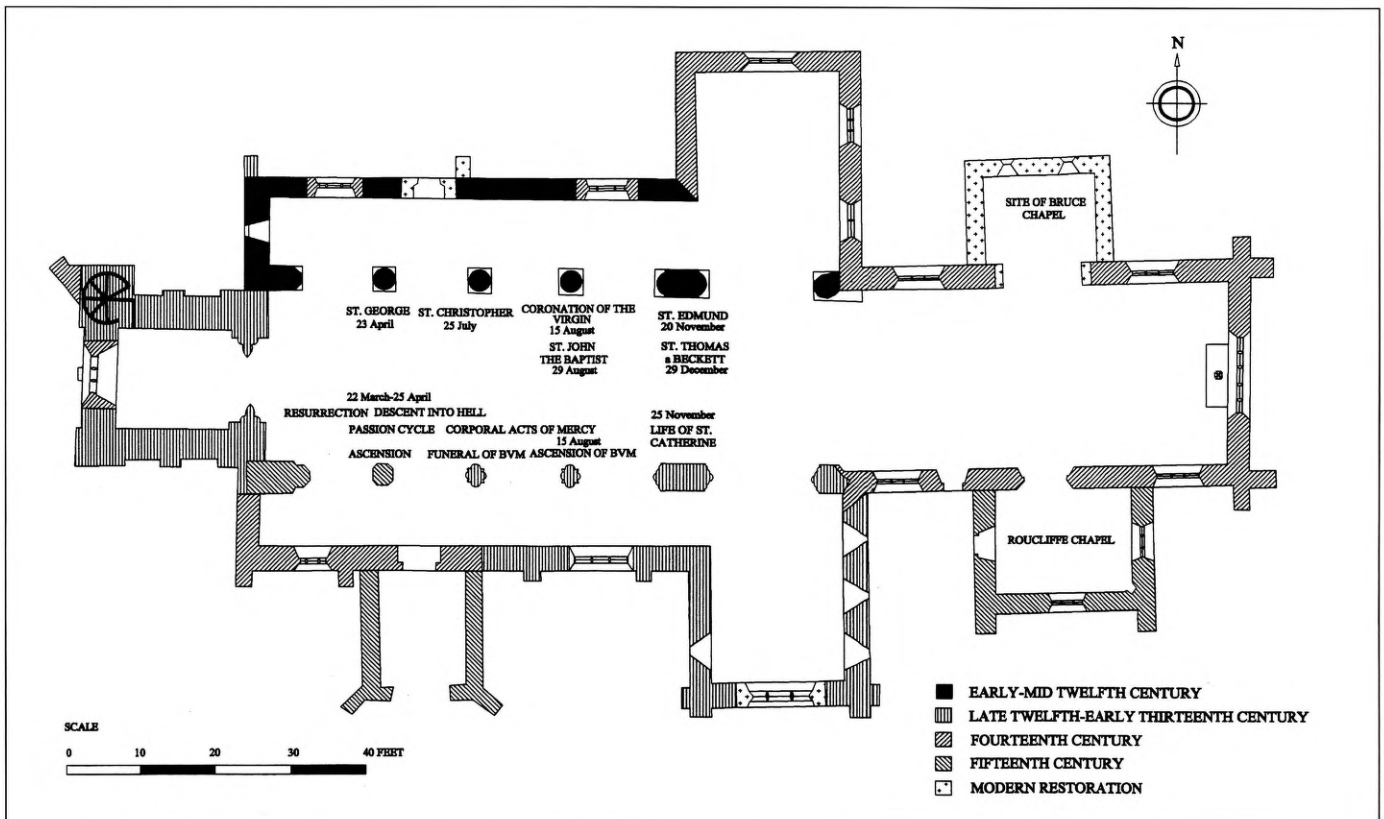


Fig 2 Ground plan of St Peter & St Paul's Church, Pickering (Illustration: K Giles after VCH)

During the 14th century extensive alterations were made to the structure of the church. The chancel was completely rebuilt and widened by approximately five feet. The transept arches were rebuilt and splayed to accommodate this change, although they retained their 12th-century responds. Projecting corbels adjacent to the chancel arch indicate the position of the medieval rood loft, which was probably associated with a screen. The north transept was also rebuilt during the 14th century and in 1337 Sir William Bruce founded a chantry chapel on the north side of the chancel. Although this was destroyed before 1785 (Spencer Hall 1854, 68), Bruce's effigy survives in the north-east corner of the nave.

Substantial additions and alterations were also made in the 15th century. In 1407 a chantry chapel, which still contains the alabaster effigies, was constructed on the south side of the chancel in memory of Sir David and Dame Margery Roucliffe. The most impressive 15th-century alteration was the reconstruction of the upper part of the walls of the nave and the replacement of the earlier (probably 12th- or 13th-century) fenestration with a clerestory consisting of five two-light, square-headed windows along each wall (Fig 1). Most of the 12th- and 13th-century arcade arches were retained, with the exception of the westernmost arcade arches which were partially rebuilt (but which retained their rounded form) and the westernmost pier and respond of the southern

arcade. The clerestory windows were placed above the centre of the arcade arches and were therefore flanked by large blank areas of wall surface, creating a mural 'canvas' for a cycle of contemporary wall paintings. Externally, the nave, chancel and south aisle were augmented in the 15th century by an embattled parapet; an architectural feature which is repeated in one of the scenes in the wall paintings. The rebuilding of the porch also dates to this period and, together with the remodelling of the western arcade arches, may have formed part of a reordering of the entrance into the church.

There is less evidence of the major changes which must have been made to the church during the Reformation. These probably included the removal of the rood loft, screen and any images and stained glass considered idolatrous. The wall paintings were probably whitewashed during this period. By 1546-47 the chantry certificates simply record the existence of Sir William Bruce's chantry, dedicated to St John, and a 'service' dedicated to 'Our Ladye' founded by the parishioners (Page 1894-95, 57-58).

During the Victorian period the church was restored. Repairs were evidently being carried out in 1852, when the cycle of wall paintings was first uncovered, but the major programme of restoration which included uncovering the wall paintings for the second time was carried out in 1876. The extent of the repairs is reflected in a Faculty licence 'to

take down and remove all such parts of the stonework of the said fabric . . . and carefully rebuild and restore the same in exact accordance with the present style of architecture' (BIHR Pickering FAC 1876/6b 1). Internally, alterations included relaying the floor in concrete and removing the 'pews, stalls and other interior fittings in the chancel, nave, aisles and transepts' and all those 'monuments, tombstones, gravestones . . . that may interfere with or impede the progress of the said work, observing nonetheless all decency and decorum' (BIHR Pickering FAC 1876/6b 13, 16). At some point during the course of the restoration work the cycle of 15th-century wall paintings was rediscovered on the walls of the nave and the Faculty was extended to 'uncover and restore the ancient mural paintings in the said church so far as may be deemed expedient' (BIHR Pickering FAC 1876/6b 17). It is to the discovery, restoration and meaning of the paintings that this article now turns.

Discovery and restoration of the cycle

In 1852 the cycle of 15th-century wall paintings was seen and sketched by a York architect, William Hey Dykes, who presented a report to the Yorkshire Architectural Society the following month. Hey Dykes' account also formed the basis of a paper presented to the Yorkshire Archaeological Institute in 1854. Both accounts refer to the destruction and whitewashing of the paintings by the incumbent, the Rev Ponsonby, only a fortnight after their discovery. The paintings were rediscovered in 1876–78 by the Rev Lightfoot, who decided to 'repaint the whole surface of the pictures in oils' on the grounds that 'mutilated as they had been, the paintings could not have remained in any church used as a place of worship without more or less restoration' (Lightfoot 1895, 353). Despite the apparent loss of Hey Dykes' drawings, and of a series of photographs taken before Lightfoot's 'restoration' of 1876–78, it is possible to establish several important facts about the original scheme from these articles (Bundle 1950, 14; Couse 1938). First, the present cycle occupies the same area and extent of wall space as the original. Although Spencer Hall noted that the paintings extended 'from the west end to the chancel arch', he was relying on the sketches of Hey Dykes and had not seen the cycle himself (1854, 66). Second, other images were uncovered in 1852 but have subsequently disappeared and third, some of these appear to have formed part of an earlier mural scheme. Hey Dykes describes traces of figures on the soffit of the north arcade arches, above and either side of the capitals of the pillars, surmounted by a trefoil-headed canopy of Norman or Transitional style (1853, 280–81). He also noticed an 'invecked floriated pattern' in red lines on one south arcade arch and a zig-zag pattern in black on the north transept arch, terminating in a *fleur-de-lys* at the crown of the arch.

Both he and Spencer Hall (1854, 67) refer to the discovery of a 'Doom' or 'Last Judgement' on the south wall of the north transept. This exceeded the 15th-century cycle 'both in beauty of design and brilliancy of colour', but had been 'wantonly destroyed' (Hey Dykes 1853, 288). They also mention a series of saints and Apostles in the splays of the clerestory windows, including St Anne teaching the Virgin to read and St Matthew. These must have been contemporary with the 15th-century cycle, but they do not appear to have been re-exposed by Lightfoot in 1876–78.

The scale of Lightfoot's restoration has resulted in the general dismissal of the cycle by art historians as a Victorian restoration. However, Hey Dykes' description of 1852 allows us to assess the scale of hypothetical reconstruction employed by Lightfoot in 1876–78. Only two scenes – the martyrdom of St Catherine and the lower part of the body of St Edmund – appear to have been created by Lightfoot. Both had been severely damaged by funerary monuments, but sufficient evidence within the scenes survived to make the reconstructions plausible. The fact that the basic iconography of the cycle survived this restoration is central to the interpretations presented below.

Content and meaning of the cycle

In general, art historians have dismissed 15th-century wall paintings as being inferior to those of previous centuries in terms of the coherence of subject matter and the quality of their design and execution (Park 1987). Rickert for example, argues that 'English wall paintings of the fifteenth century, though fairly numerous, as far as can be judged never reach a high level of execution . . . An orderly presentation of the varied examples of fifteenth-century painting and glass in a stylistic sequence is difficult' (1965, 186). Similarly Saunders notes that 'paintings of the fifteenth century in parish churches are very numerous, but cannot make up by their quantity for what they lack in quality' (1932, 177). A more recent caveat to these dismissive accounts is provided by Tudor-Craig who argues that while the brusque 'peasant work' of 15th-century wall paintings might not have the majesty of earlier 12th-century theological cycles, it often has an immediacy of impact which parallels that of the contemporary mystery plays (1987, 44–45).

To understand the meaning and significance of the Pickering cycle it is necessary to move away from analyses which focus on aesthetics, design, execution and authenticity of detail towards the broader picture, namely function and meaning in the context of the late medieval parish church. Medieval wall paintings are generally presumed to have had three main functions (Rouse 1991). They were a means of illuminating blank wall surfaces and of uniting decorative schemes which might also incorporate elements of architectural sculpture, stained glass and screens

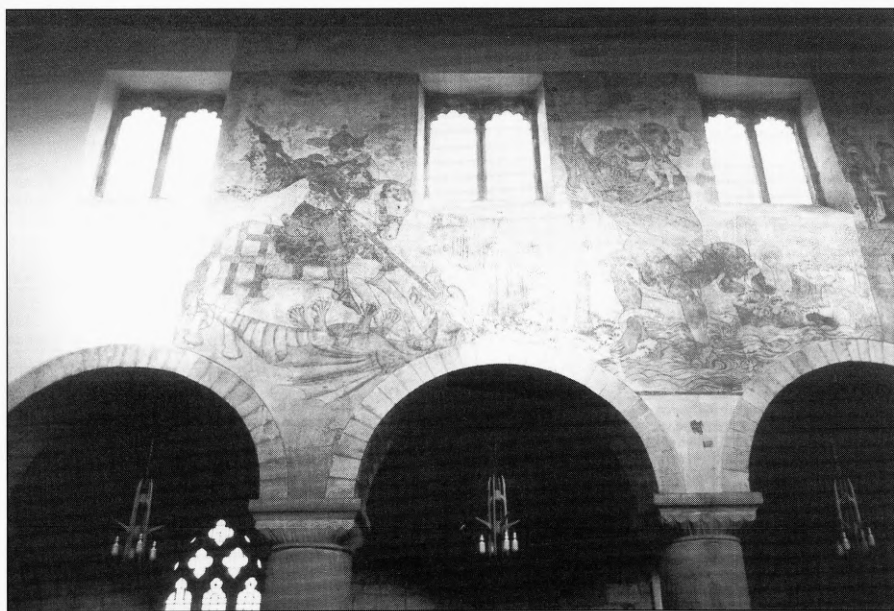


Fig 3 *St Christopher and St George, north wall, Pickering Parish Church (Photo: K Giles)*

or panel paintings. They were designed to inspire devotional contemplation in their beholders and, closely related to this, was their didactic function in communicating complex theological principles and doctrinal messages. To this might be added a fourth, that as the result of acts of patronage, wall paintings also functioned as symbols of individual status or communal pride. Tudor-Craig has outlined a shift in the iconographic content of 15th-century wall paintings which is particularly germane to the interpretation of the Pickering cycle (1987, 44–45). This is a move towards combining the depiction of favourite saints, particularly martyrs, with ‘short-hand moral schema’ and images of the Passion of Christ. Pickering parish church eloquently articulates this shift and suggests some possible explanations for it.

The wall paintings at Pickering are located on the north and south walls of the nave. At present the images commence in the second bay from the west on both walls and terminate in the fifth bay of the nave, adjacent to the transept arches. There are no references to the discovery of images in the first and last bays of the nave in either 1852 or 1876–78, but there is no architectural reason why the cycle should not have extended further. Some of the images extend the full height of the nave whilst others are banded and occupy half the wall space or the panels between the clerestory

windows. Some are simply iconographic representations of popular saints whilst others depict more detailed scenes from their lives and/or martyrdoms. There are also narrative scenes from the Passion of Christ and the Death of the Virgin. There are no secular images in the cycle. In general, these narrative sequences are ‘read’ from left to right. Some, but not all, are accompanied by texts, although further research is necessary to establish the extent to which these are original. The location of the images at Pickering is shown in Fig 2 and the images themselves are presented in Figs 3–6. Analysis of the cycle commences at the west end and moves eastwards (with the exception of the scene of the Coronation of the Virgin, which is discussed in relation to the images at clerestory level on the south wall), turning to the east end of the south wall and moving westwards, in order to enable the narrative sequence to be read appropriately.

The second and third bays of the north wall are dominated by giant representations of St George and St Christopher (Fig 3). These are the largest images in the church and extend the full height of the wall from the spandrel of the arcade arch to the wall head. There are no clear architectural or decorative borders framing the images, which run into each other, although St Christopher is separated from the adjacent images to the east by a thin line. The depiction of both saints appears conventional, although it is clear from Lightfoot’s comments that St



Fig 4 *St John the Baptist, the Coronation of the Virgin, St Thomas a Beckett and St Edmund, north wall, Pickering Parish Church (Photo: K Giles)*

George had been badly damaged prior to the restoration of 1876–78.

St George is shown on horseback, spearing the dragon which is trampled beneath his horse's feet. The maiden is missing, although it is possible that she originally appeared as a diminutive figure to the west of St George beneath the clerestory window. This would parallel the hermit depicted with St Christopher. Although St George appears in mural paintings from the 12th century onwards, most surviving examples date from the 15th century, when his popularity as one of the legendary moralities and the patron of English soldiers was at its height.

St Christopher does not generally appear in wall paintings much before the 15th century. During this period he became one of the most popular subjects depicted. At Pickering he is shown as a giant man crossing a river swirling with serpents between two rocky shores. The Christ child sits on his left shoulder and in his right hand he holds a flowering staff. To the west stands the hermit who, according to the Golden Legend records baptised him. The juxtaposition of St George and St Christopher was common in late medieval wall paintings and their location at the western end of the north wall can be explained by the popular belief that those who viewed the image of St Christopher would be secured from harm or from a violent death for the rest of the day (Keyser 1883, li). It is tempting to suggest that the reconstruction of the western pier and respond of the south arcade of the nave was designed to facilitate the view of the saint through the newly constructed south porch.

To the east of St Christopher is a scene of the martyrdom of St John the Baptist (Fig 4). The scene extends from the spandrel of the arcade arch to clerestory sill level and is just over a bay in length, terminating in the spandrel between the third and fourth bays. The scene is separated from the paintings to the east by a band of foliage. A similar band frames the lower part of the image in the spandrel of the arcade arch. The narrative sequence in the scene is rather confusing, for it shows one long trestle table in an interior with a tiled floor. Behind the table are seated eight figures, but these are in fact four figures repeated twice for narrative effect. The crowned figures are those of Herod Antiphas and his bride Herodias. They are accompanied by a male and female courtier. The narrative starts at the east side of the scene where St John stands, rebuking Herod for his bigamous marriage whilst



Fig 5 *St Catherine of Alexandria, the Seven Corporal Acts of Mercy, the Passion of Christ and scenes of the funeral and Ascension of the Blessed Virgin Mary, south wall, Pickering Parish Church (Photo: K Giles)*

Salome, the daughter of Herodias, 'tumbles' on the tiled floor. The narrative then switches to the west end of the scene where Salome witnesses the martyrdom of John, and then moves back to the centre of the image where the saint's head is presented to the King on a charger.

The east end of the north wall is occupied by the depiction of the martyrdoms of St Edmund and St Thomas a Beckett (Fig 4). That of Edmund extends from the spandrel of the arcade arch to clerestory sill level, whilst St Thomas occupies the space from sill level to the wall head. The images are separated from adjacent scenes and from each other by bands of foliage. Although the martyrdom of St Edmund is easily confused with that of St Sebastian, the former is distinguished by being crowned and by being pierced by more arrows than the latter. Fortunately Edmund's crowned head and neck, pierced by two arrows, survived the damage caused by a funerary monument to the lower part of this scene (Hey Dykes 1853, 288; Lightfoot 1895, 360). The image is accompanied by a scroll bearing the inscription '*Heaven blys to hys mede. Hem sall have for his gud ded.*'

Above St Edmund is the martyrdom of St Thomas a Beckett. Images of the martyr were highly popular during the 15th century, but they seldom survived the 16th century. The depiction of the scene at Pickering is also slightly unusual in that it is before the murder. St Thomas is shown kneeling before an altar which, appropriately, faces in the direction of the high altar of the parish church. Thomas' chaplain, Grim, stands to the side of the altar, remonstrating with the four knights – Fitz-Urse, Tracy, De

Morville and Brito – who draw their swords to murder the Archbishop. The scene takes place in an ecclesiastical interior, replete with a tiled floor and crocketed canopies with lierne vaults. To the east of the scene is a structure which may represent an inner chamber or chapel. The juxtaposition of St Edmund and St Thomas may relate to the fact that both were English martyrs whose popularity in the south-east had spread nationally by the 15th century. It is also worth pointing out that all the male saints depicted on the north wall of the nave (and indeed St Catherine on the south) were martyred by being beheaded. The significance of this is at present unclear.

Opposite these scenes, on the south wall, is a striking narrative sequence of the life of St Catherine extending from clerestory level to the spandrels between the final bay of the arcade and the south transept arch (Fig 5). The scene is divided into four horizontal bands which are read from east to west (ie from left to right). The first band depicts Catherine protesting to the Emperor Maxentius about the worship of an idol and being placed in prison; the second shows her debating with the philosophers, who are converted and martyred as Catherine looks on from her prison cell; Catherine is then stripped and flogged. The third band depicts Catherine returned to her cell and visited by the converted Empress Faustina and ministering angels; Faustina is then executed and Catherine tortured on four wheels which break asunder. The final scene had been damaged badly by a funerary monument and although elements such as the officer at the prison door, the angel's wing, the attendant and part of Maxentius' head survived, the depiction of St Catherine is a Victorian reconstruction (Lightfoot 1895, 364). St Catherine was an exceptionally popular late medieval saint, whose inclusion in the cycle may be related to her function as a *via exempla* for the laity. There is also a tenuous connection between the mother of Catherine and Constantine which may have strengthened her popularity in and around York (Lightfoot 1985, 362).

To the west of the Life of St Catherine is a horizontal band occupying a space between the arcade arches and clerestory sill level. This contains two sets of images: to the east, the Seven Corporal Acts of Mercy and further west, the Passion of Christ (Fig 5). When first uncovered, the Corporal Acts were misinterpreted as scenes from the lives of the saints Cosmo and Damian. However, Lightfoot recognised their significance as the acts of mercy prescribed by Matthew 25:35–37 which came to dominate both the iconography and practice of charity in the 15th century (1895, 365). The scene shows (from east to west) feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, sheltering the stranger, clothing the naked, visiting the imprisoned, tending the sick, and burying the dead. There are no divisions between the scenes. It is odd that there should be no division between the last scene of the Corporal Acts and the first associated with the Passion of Christ – the Garden

of Gethsemane and the healing of the ear of Malchus. There is, however, a line separating the latter from the second image of the Passion – Christ before Pilate. One can only presume that either the 15th-century painter or more likely the Victorian restorers misinterpreted this break. This is supported by the fact that the edge of the robe of St Peter crosses from the first to the second scene in the narrative.

The Passion cycle consists of Jesus healing the ear of Malchus, Jesus standing before Pilate and being flogged, the carrying of the cross, the Crucifixion (with Mary and John either side of the dead Christ), the descent from the cross, and the burial of Christ. In the spandrel below the first scenes of the Passion is the Descent into Hell. Christ is shown ministering to those who had died without knowledge of Him, including Adam and Eve who emerge from the mouth of hell. In the spandrel below the burial is a depiction of the Resurrection, where Christ emerges triumphantly from a sarcophagus flanked by angels, whilst a soldier falls back in amazement.

Above the Corporal Acts of Mercy and the Passion of Christ are a series of three paintings flanking the clerestory windows. They are framed by similar foliate borders and have been interpreted as the Death and Ascension of the Blessed Virgin Mary, designed to be read in conjunction with the Coronation of the Virgin scene, located directly opposite at clerestory level on the south wall. However, closer examination of the first scene reveals a foot in the upper part of the frame. It is therefore possible that this scene represents the Ascension of Christ rather than the Death of the Virgin and that it should be read as the conclusion to the images of the Passion, Descent into Hell and Resurrection immediately below.

To the east of this is a scene depicting the funeral of the Virgin. The final image appears to show the Assumption of the Virgin, with angels to the left and a fragment of the girdle thrown down to St Thomas on the right of the scene. On the north wall is the Coronation of the Virgin by the Holy Trinity. Mary is flanked by the saints and above her appears the community of Heaven – men and women depicted in 15th-century dress leaning over a crenellated battlement (Fig 4). The Coronation of the Virgin by the Trinity became an increasingly popular image during the mid to later 15th century and its iconography had a dual symbolism (Morgan 1994, 223, 241). The first was the reunion of the Holy family: a representation of the mysteries of the Trinity and Incarnation in human terms. The second was the elevation of Mary to Queen of Heaven, reflecting contemporary beliefs in her role as the main intercessor for mankind. Rather than associating this role with the Last Judgement (as had been the case in the 13th and 14th centuries) the 15th-century wall paintings at Pickering depict her as a constant advocate before the Trinity for mankind. The scene therefore operates at two

levels; both as a devotional image and as a presentation of the theological doctrines of the Trinity and Divine Grace.

The detailed description of the Pickering wall paintings presented above has sought to explore the significance of particular images within the cycle. When the iconography of the scheme is considered in its broader architectural and spatial context several further layers of meaning become apparent. The images on the north and south walls appear to serve subtly different functions. With the exception of the Virgin, the images on the north wall are all male saints who were martyred for the faith by being beheaded. They therefore functioned at one level as *via exempla*, either as soldiers of Christ who fought for their beliefs (George and Edmund) or hermits and priests whose lives revolved around prayer (Christopher, John and Thomas). It is also possible to read an underlying tension between sacred and secular authority in scenes such as the martyrdoms of St Thomas a Beckett and St John the Baptist. At another level all these saints were also intercessors for the faithful and this might explain their juxtaposition with the image of the Virgin-as-intercessor in the Coronation scene.

If the north wall of the church is read as providing a model of *via exempla* and intercessory saints, the south wall appears to serve a much more didactic and theological function. St Catherine of Alexandria can, of course, be seen as another – albeit female – *via exempla* and intercessor. However, her juxtaposition with a series of doctrinal and theological images suggests that it was her role as a model of the knowledgeable Christian which was of greater significance. This explains the prominence of her debate with the philosophers within the cycle and the fact that the

largest surviving area of text is also associated with this scene. In this way, St Catherine provides an introduction to the didactic scenes of the Corporal Acts of Mercy and the Passion of Christ. The image of St Anne teaching the Virgin to read, in the splays of the clerestory window, may well have reinforced this message (Hey Dykes 1853, 281). The role of medieval wall paintings as a *Biblia Pauperum* has already been discussed (Rouse 1991, 13). By the late medieval period the seven Corporal Acts of Mercy had become juxtaposed in popular imagination with the seven deadly sins; a connection reflected in sources such as the 14th-century *Lay Folks' Catechism*. Thus their depiction on the walls of Pickering Church served both as a mnemonic for aspects of the catechism as well as a doctrinal reminder of the acts of charity which would be taken into account on the Day of Judgement. The scenes from the Passion and Resurrection had a similarly didactic function in communicating the theological and doctrinal basis of salvation to the laity, but they also sought to inspire devotion through the beholder's contemplation of the Passion and Suffering of Christ. Their juxtaposition with images of Mary may also have reminded onlookers of the 'Seven Sorrows' of the Virgin, which included the events of the Passion. Finally, it is worth turning to the meaning of the scenes associated with the Blessed Virgin Mary. She links the iconography of the two walls. This connection can be explained by the fact that the Virgin not only acted as an intercessor and *via exempla*, but also that she was central to the doctrine and theology of the late medieval church.

The close relationship between the wall paintings and their architectural frame suggests that they were part of a

Bay (see Fig 2)	Wall	Image	Feast day
bays 1–2	south	Passion and Resurrection	Easter – moveable feast from 27th March – 25th April but Resurrection nominally 27th March
bays 1–2	north	St George	23rd April
bays 2–3	south	Corporal Acts of Mercy	associated with devotional contemplation, especially Easter catechism
bays 2–3	north	St Christopher	25th July
bays 3–4	south	Funeral/Assumption of Virgin	15th August
bays 3–4	north	Coronation of BVM	15th August
bays 3–4	north	St John the Baptist	29th August
bays 4–5	south	St Catherine	25th November
bays 4–5	north	St Edmund St Thomas a Beckett	20th November 29th December

single, coherent 15th-century scheme. It seems reasonable to suggest that this was undertaken as an act of patronage by prominent individuals or particular groups within the parish, since by the later medieval period the upkeep of the nave had become the responsibility of the laity and the chancel that of the clergy, reflecting their different liturgical functions (Jacob 1969, 264). The prominence of images of the Virgin may indicate that the 'service of Our Lady' mentioned in the chantry certificates of 1546–47 was one of these groups (Page 1894, 57–58). Indeed, the fact that such a scheme is likely to have been the product of negotiation between a range of individuals and social groups may explain why 15th-century wall paintings in general appear piecemeal or lacking in coherence. The choice of subject matter may reflect the different preferences of heterogeneous parish communities rather than the single-minded visions of the aristocratic or ecclesiastical patrons of earlier mural schemes. Fifteenth-century wall paintings may therefore have served a very different function from that of their predecessors. A number of scholars have drawn attention to the increasingly active participation of the laity in the devotional and liturgical practices of the late medieval church (Binski 1996; Burgess 1988; 1991). Acts of artistic patronage such as those at Pickering enabled the laity to realise this through the depiction of orthodox images which served an important didactic and liturgical function within the church. Such acts also reinforced the standing of patrons within the community; an example of the sophisticated use of religious ideology and practice to reinforce social identity and status which so characterised late medieval society (Ford 1992; Duffy 1992). It is perhaps this function which should capture our attention when seeking to understand the integrated architectural and artistic schemes of the 15th century.

Consideration of one additional factor enables a deeper meaning of the Pickering cycle to become apparent. When the feasts of the saints or images depicted are plotted in relation to the plan and bay rhythm of the church it becomes apparent that they are placed in a calendrical order, essentially forming a liturgical calendar. Fig 1 shows the feast days plotted on the ground plan of Pickering church and the table opposite lists the feasts in calendrical order. The iconography of the images is crucial to this interpretation. For example, it is the feast of the death of John, celebrated on the 29th August, not his birth on the 24th June, which fits with the sequence. The function of the wall paintings as a liturgical calendar also provides an explanation for the location of the Coronation of the Virgin between the third and fourth bays of the north wall. As far as this author is aware, although individual images such as the Labours of the Months and the Wheel of Fortune are understood to be symbols of seasonality and of the passing of time, entire cycles of 15th-century wall

paintings have never previously been interpreted in this light.

Traditionally, the study of medieval liturgy has tended to revolve around two areas of research: the system of liturgical practice in particular places at specific times and those books or manuscripts used to frame such ritual practice (Pfaff 1998, 2). There has also been a strong tradition within art and architectural history concerned with the liturgical function of medieval art and architecture. As Draper notes, there are difficulties in establishing a direct correlation between architectural design and liturgical practice (1987, 83). Nevertheless, from the general understanding that ecclesiastical buildings could provide a structural setting and architectural evocation of the Kingdom of Heaven, to the specific interest in the ways in which liturgical practice was framed within the parish church, scholars have sought to understand the reciprocal relationship between the form of medieval religious buildings and the actions which took place within them (Coldstream 1987; Martindale 1992; Draper 1987). Even within these traditions of scholarship there is considerable debate about the meanings of the terms 'liturgy' and 'liturgical'. Reynolds argues that liturgical performance is in essence an art form because all the actions associated with it 'require organisation of space, sight-line, raised daises, and other elements of architectural design' (1995, 60–61). This idea – of liturgy as an active, performative practice – is also stressed by Swanson (1992). He argues that liturgical performance was aimed at different levels of audience and therefore necessitated the use of appropriate 'props', including vestments, plate and ornaments. Rather than seeing ecclesiastical architecture as the stage-set or backdrop against which such theatre was played out, we therefore appear to be moving towards an understanding of the active role played by architectural form and decoration in framing liturgical practice.

Liturgical calendars usually form part of books or manuscripts such as missals, breviaries, psalters or pontificals. Yet Pfaff argues that contemporary scholars have thought 'surprisingly little' about the phenomenon of the liturgical calendar (1998, 6). It is usually the list and relative 'grading' of saints contained within these calendars which is the focus of attention, either for the purposes of iconographical or hagiographical study, or as a means of dating and provenancing the manuscript or book under enquiry (see for example Morgan & Marks 1981, 133–71). The ways in which liturgical calendars sought to frame and order medieval time through the *temporale* and *sanctorale* has received much less critical attention. The dialectical relationship between these sources and other aspects of material culture, such as architecture, stained glass and wall paintings has also been largely overlooked.

Pickering forces us to reassess our understanding of these relationships. In many ways the structure and form of

the cycle echoes that of contemporary liturgical calendars. It commences with the Easter cycle and the Resurrection, whose prominence within 15th-century liturgical calendars and nominal dating to 27 March has been discussed by Rose (1986). Moreover, it could be argued that the saints at Pickering are given different levels of prominence according to the amount of wall space occupied by their image, a phenomenon which seems to parallel the 'grading' of saints in liturgical calendars. The hypothesis advanced in this article is not simply that the liturgical cycle framed by the walls of Pickering Church was inspired by a now-lost liturgical calendar. Rather, it is that wall paintings were simply one of the material mechanisms through which liturgical *and* social practices were structured and reproduced within the medieval parish church. The nature of these practices must remain the subject of further research. What kinds of activities, such as processions, services at subsidiary altars and prayers were framed by the conjunction of image and bay rhythm? What does this tell us about the performative nature of medieval liturgical practice? What was the relationship between the images in the paintings and other aspects of religious material culture, including altars, screens, galleries, statues, stained glass and vestments? At what level did the paintings operate and who were their audience(s)? At what ritual moments did the didactic function of the images outweigh their calendrical significance and how did this change over time?

A detailed consideration of medieval concepts of time and temporality lies beyond the scope of this article, but this area of study holds immense potential for the interpretation of the Pickering cycle. For example, Higgins emphasises the tensions that existed between competing notions of time in the medieval period, particularly those following either linear or cyclical models of temporality (1989). Linear notions were associated with the 'straight path' of Christian time and contrasted by writers such as Augustine with the cyclical Platonic idea of eternal return. Yet within the medieval church there was also an acceptance of the cyclical nature of things – the natural, liturgical and metaphorical 'cursus' (Higgins 1989, 230). The liturgical cursus created a framework for the complex range of moveable feasts, saints days and daily offices of the medieval church. Knowledge of this cursus was central to the authority of the clergy: 'knowledge of the right time and season was power, for it was this knowledge that governed both the acts of everyday life and decisions of state' (Landes 1983, 33).

Does this suggest an additional level of significance in the creation of the scheme of wall paintings at Pickering; an attempt by an active 15th-century laity to participate in the ordering of liturgical time itself?

Conclusions

Traditionally, there has been an overwhelming tendency to compartmentalise the study of particular aspects of medieval art and material culture within and between the disciplines of art history and archaeology (Sauerlander 1995, 4–5). Although this has been essential to the development of specialist knowledge and expertise within particular 'fields of study', it has often resulted in the masking of the interrelationship of medieval decorative art and architectural structure. Recent works such as Raguin, Brush & Draper's edited volume *Artistic integration in Gothic buildings* (1995) and the forthcoming *The built surface* (Anderson & Koehler 2001) have sought to develop a more integrated approach to the interpretation of the art and architecture of the middle ages. If we are to gain an understanding of the complex meanings of buildings such as St Peter & St Paul, Pickering during the late middle ages we must combine this with an archaeological interest in the construction of 'social space' within the late medieval parish church; the use of ecclesiastical architecture as a *locale* in which particular forms of social practice and power relationship were reproduced over time (after Graves 1989). We must accept that these buildings were often the product of competing and conflicting interests in the past; tensions which must be reflected in our interpretations of them in the present.

This article has sought to emphasise the importance of the 15th-century cycle of wall paintings at Pickering. By relating the iconography of the images to their spatial and architectural context it has been possible to identify several different layers or levels of meaning encoded in the cycle. The interpretations presented above illustrate the potential of interpreting medieval art within its immediate architectural and spatial context and force us to re-examine existing assumptions about 15th-century wall paintings. Future research will compare Pickering with other contemporary cycles and explore the evidence for an earlier mural scheme in the church. It will also seek to understand why the marking of liturgical time was of such significance to the late medieval parish community.

Kate Giles is the York Minster Research Fellow and a lecturer in the Department of Archaeology at the University of York.

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