Reconstructing English Medieval Parish Church Chantries and Chapels: an archaeological approach

By Simon Roffey

The study of medieval chantry chapels has recently reached an impasse in that they have been subject to historical and architectural research, and some of the finest, predominately monastic, examples have been studied in some detail. But a considerable amount of evidence for chantries and late medieval religion can be recovered by studying surviving structural evidence and much more can be revealed, especially at parish level, by the application of modern archaeological and analytical techniques.

A traditional definition for the medieval chantry chapel is that it was essentially *'a foundation and endowment of a Mass by one or more benefactors, to be celebrated at an altar, for the souls of the founders and other specified persons'* (Pantin 1959, 216). However, apart from being essentially individualistic, or exclusive, monuments their appeal was wider, providing a context for both private and public piety. Similarly, on a social level, chantries have been said to have produced a *'well administered and socially active church community and perhaps contributed to the growth of neighbourly involvement in parish life'* (Burgess 1996, 148). Intercession itself offered access to temporal as well as spiritual favours through the provision of alms and education and other systems of communal welfare, a provision inherent in many chantry foundations.

Despite the Dissolution of the Chantries in 1547 and consequent restructuring of church topography, significant evidence, often unrecognised, still remains for the survival of many parish church chantry chapels. It is this evidence that forms the basis for current archaeological research involving the recording and examination of chapels in southern and western England. This paper will demonstrate how the application of archaeological techniques, particularly structural analysis, can be applied to the study of chapels in parish churches with only partial survival of evidence.

A note on terminology

One of the most complex terms to define is the concept of the 'chantry' itself. As a *'foundation and endowment of a Mass'* it is largely an ideological concept, not a physical entity and hence, technically speaking, not visible archaeologically. The context, or 'frame', for chantry practice, the chapel itself, provides the physical evidence and the basis for archaeological research. Likewise, the term 'chapel' or 'private chapel' is used throughout the research and applies to structures that were instigated by individuals, or group of individuals, (as opposed to chapels controlled by the clergy), and who were prominent or influential in their inception or administration. In this sense, both private chapels and chantries maybe viewed as *'centres for facilitating salvation'* (Burgess 1988, 73). Likewise, archaeologically there is often no difference between the chapels of guilds, fraternities and chantries and in essence they were *'different incarnations of the same intercessory impulse'* (Kumin 1996, 159). Furthermore, as Hamilton-Thompson points out, it is often very difficult to determine *'whether a given foundation should or should not be considered a chantry as the idea was at the root of all medieval works of piety'* (Hamilton-Thompson in Wood-Legh 1965, 47). Archaeologically speaking, the presence of a former chantry is impossible to differentiate from similar intercessory foundations, for which a surviving document for the foundation of a chantry exists. For example, private chapels that contain intercessory features, like altars and individually-linked associations, such as tombs and personal symbols that forge a direct spatial reference to the eucharistic rituals enacted, involve or 'presence' the deceased directly within the rituals. Intercession is therefore implicit with the physical structure and layout of the chapel itself. The issue here is perhaps one of terminology and not interpretation.

What further complicates issues of orthodox identification is that many so-called private or appropriated chapels (for example, chapels that have been adapted for the use of individuals and their monuments) that contain intercessory features, such as altars and associated tombs or overt personal symbols, may have actually been founded before the decease of the individual. Whilst providing the same function, technically speaking, as a chantry, there is often no documentary record of usage. Overall, foundations that contain physical evidence for intercessory practice form the basis for this study and the subject of this paper.

Method statement: structural analysis and the study of parish church chapels and chantries

This research is based on the systematic recording and analysis of a particular form of standing building. Although it utilises both primary and secondary documentary sources, it is really about the study of the evidence of the buildings themselves. Hence, it utilises an archaeological methodology incorporating general information about the archaeological recording of standing buildings and their analysis.

The methodology of building recording, and the problems of applying an objective approach to structural analysis have been discussed by Ferris, who acknowledges the value of systematic approaches to recording, particularly the use of *pro-formae,* or standardised recording sheets, to provide valuable, versatile and systematic approaches to the evidence (Ferris 1989, 13). Ferris points out that one of the problems with the examination of standing buildings is that they can sometimes be unfocused and, in the case of architectural historians, they can be *'personalised'* and *'resplendent in style but lacking in objectivity'* (Ferris 1989, 12). In comparison, in archaeological excavation the use of systematic methods of detailed recording, utilising recording sheets for contexts and masonry, is almost universal. Despite the value of such *pro-formae,* however, many professional archaeological units still do not use them for the recording of standing fabric and therefore by-pass the value and versatility that such a methodology can offer (ibid). The techniques for recording excavations should be adapted for the survey and interpretation of all standing structures (Meeson 1989, 18). It has been claimed that the value of such an approach lies both in its versatility and its ability to answer important questions about changes in form and function of the building (Ferris 1989; Smith 1989), as well as providing a context for the *'simultaneous interaction of observation, recording and deduction'* (Meeson 1989, 18). As will be seen, this approach is particularly valuable to the study of medieval parish chapels and chantries where the evidence presented is diverse, and in some instances, fragmentary.

Detailed recording is rarely appropriate for standing buildings as the advancement of knowledge is better served by selective recording with well-defined aims in mind (Smith 1989, 20). Bold has consequently expanded upon this by stating that the recording of standing fabric should seek to *'define what is significant'* (Bold 1990, 16). Though such an approach can be seen to be in danger of falling back upon the personal and subjective approach warned against by Ferris, it does allow for the construction of a well-defined versatile *pro-forma* that seeks to identify and record what is pertinent to the particular questions the archaeologist is asking, for example, concepts such as form and function, materials, construction and particularly the use of space. It is particularly appropriate for the study of existing structures, such as chapels, where research aims can be defined prior to recording and analysis. That being said, *pro-formae* must not be constricted by the *'impossibility of watertight divisions'* (Smith 1985: 83). There has to be space for an element of subjective interpretation on site, as well as objective recording and analysis. In light of this, Jane Grenville has considered the consequent need for recording methods to be tailored to suit the particular questions that are being asked (Grenville 2001). In particular, she suggests how such a defined tailor-made recording methodology can be particularly effective in investigating *'the use of the interior* (of churches) *as spaces of worship and ritual'* (Grenville 2001, 15-19). Ultimately, the recording of buildings should provide a detailed record that can tell us about the organisation of society and about social and economic trends. Consequently, in the study of chantries and chapels it should help uncover how the individual need for intercession affected the church as a whole, revealing an insight into the practice of religion in its widest sense.

As a result the recording methodology allows for defined standardised recording of medieval chantries and chapels. The construction of the *pro-forma* follows both the 'structural element' model discussed by Ferris (1989, 19), concerned with information about structure and materials, such as evidence for fixtures and fittings, decoration and changes in chapel fabric; and the 'questionnaire' model discussed by Smith (1985, 83), allowing for a set of pre-set questions to be answered, with regard to the use of space, access, light and vision as well as the relationships between tombs, altars and associated symbols. In this sense, however, the chapel recording template is what can be termed a 'specialist template': fields of recorded information include internal and external structural summaries, relevant historical materials, internal and external fixtures, fittings and decoration, and spatial and visual analysis. These fields are supported by detailed photographs and scale plans.

The chapel recording *pro-forma* provides an extensive database for chapel analysis and comparison. Ultimately, it allows us to gain an insight, not just into the various comparative forms of chantry and chapel, but also to reconstruct aspects of medieval ritual topography and associated religious practice and importantly the role of chantries and chapels in the realm of lay piety; examples of which we will now consider.

Chantries, chapels and the importance of vision

The following section provides a brief discussion on one element of recorded information: spatial and visual relationships, and is drawn from the recent recording and analysis of sample chapels from the south-west of England. Spatial analysis of chapels and chantries, and their relationships to the respective church, can indicate the potential nature and extent of private and public participation, in particular with regard to visual relationships. Formally, the use of view-shed analysis in archaeology has been applied largely to prehistoric monuments and generally in a wider context (ie Wheatley 2002), and by Reynolds in an early medieval landscape context (Pollard and Reynolds 2002). The use of view-shed analysis provides a useful tool in which inferences can be made about the relationships between related sites within the landscape and also to develop an understanding about the spatial relationships between archaeological monuments. The potential of such an approach to the study of monuments within the parish church has recently been illustrated (Graves 2000; Roffey 2003). The analysis therefore of visual relationships between distinct areas within the church is of importance, particularly with regard to the emphasis placed upon sight within parish church liturgy. Here, rituals enacted within the chapels and chantries called all the senses into play - the hearing of bells and litanies, the smelling of incense, the oral murmuring of supplications, and the feeling of sensuous discomfort at kneeling for the elevation. However, the main medium of this communication was through the visual senses and indeed there appears to be a whole emphasis in western lay devotion upon seeing (Dix 1945, 484). There is not only an emphasis upon direct visual communion with the host at the point of elevation, but also indirect visual contact with the symbolic elements of the chapel through its rituals, decoration and architectural embellishment.

One of the major features associated with visibility within parish church topography is the squint. An architectural feature, it acts like an internal window giving a line of sight through obstructions, normally in the form of church or chapel walls. Traditional interpretations suggest that the squint gives a clear line of sight for the laity within the aisles, to the high altar in the chancel. Squints have also been discussed in relation to the use of sacring bells (Cole 1847). At Ludham (Norfolk), the squint is connected with a vertical socket and a projecting sculptured hand, so that a *sanctus* bell can be rung when the elevation at the high altar is viewed (Graves 2000, 108). The Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 demanded annual confession, and consequently squints have also been interpreted as confessional windows (IHP 1845). At St John's Winchester, the squint from the south chapel to the chancel is inserted through the back of the chancel sedilia and therefore facilitated, it can be suggested, private correspondence between an unseen individual in the south chapel and a priest sitting in the sedilia. Provided the priest remained in this position the laity could enter and leave the church and chapel without being recognised. Certain squints may have been used in processionals, such as the passage squints at Basingstoke (Hants), Portbury (Som), Sherston (Wilts) and others, perhaps to provide priests celebrating at subsidiary altars a view of the pyx hanging above the high altar.

The variety of squint types, their size and location, when viewed collectively, suggests that they were used for a variety of functions dependent on their architectural or topographical context. The substantial aisle squints found at Hambledon (Hants), for example, clearly provide visual access to the high altar for laity in the aisle. Likewise, as discussed below, at Stoke Charity (Hants), the smaller double squint provides visual access from the aisle to the high altar and from the nave to the north wall tomb altar in the Hampton chapel. Similarly, it can be argued that the squints found in the north chapels at Brympton and Yatton (Som) allowed visual access only for a small group of individuals situated at the back of the chapels.

However, some squints may also have allowed priests serving subsidiary altars (such as chapel altars) to view the high altar to maintain a precedence of services; in a sense providing a spiritual hierarchy between altars. In the case of the Paulet north and south chapels at Old Basing (Hants), the narrow squints inserted into the entrance jambs of each chapel clearly provided very limited visual access, probably for just a single person, in this case the chapel priest. The recording and analysis of squint location and their relation to other areas of the church is significant and can reveal much about the relationship and interactions between private and communal piety as well as that between chapels and chantries and the parish church itself. It is this latter evidence that we will now examine in more detail.

Chapels, chantries and lay piety

Central to the foundation of a chapel or chantry was the mass. An association of the ritual of the mass with personal intercession had been long-standing by the late medieval period. Such an association, for example, led a certain Richard Weyvyle in 1417 to request 3,000 masses to be said for his soul in the three days immediately after the day of his death (Weaver 1903, 80). Quite how this feat was accomplished is not known. However, it indicates the importance of the mass as a unit of direct beneficial merit.

By the 16th century at the very least, it has been claimed that the low mass was the typical form of eucharistic practice (Cobb 1978, 437). Certainly this was also the most common form of chantry mass and it can therefore be argued that the chantry played a major role in the universal usage of the low mass in church practice. The performance of a low mass also helped fulfil priestly obligation to celebrate once a day in that it was relatively short, and could be performed by the priest himself assisted by a single minister, or even *'just answered by the congregation themselves'* (Dix 1945, 599). This latter factor also facilitated the fact that the living founder could actually assist in their own devotion in a very real way, by actively participating in the ritual itself. Consequently, it has been argued that it offered the laity a context for the use of vernacular prayers, which they substituted for the Latin text of the liturgy of their own personal worship (ibid).

Archaeological examination of chapels and chantries can reveal the nature and extent of private participation within individual chapels. As discussed above, among the various functions of the squint, or 'hagioscope' as it is sometimes incorrectly termed, was the provision of a view, normally to the high altar, either for the laity or for priests celebrating masses at subsidiary altars. These features offer a precious insight not just into the former location of altars, but the visual relationship between them. For example, in the north chapel at Yatton (Som), the piscina for the chapel altar is located at the east end of the chapel. Here, the squint provides a view of the high altar, and is located towards the back of the chapel, close to the tomb of Richard Newton and Emmota de Sherborne. It is possible that this western area represents an area reserved for a distinct group of people with visual access to both the high altar and chapel altar (Fig 1).

This can be further demonstrated in the south chapels at South Wraxall and Great Chalfield (Wilts), where the orientation of squints provides a view from the back of each chapel to the high altar. These squints are also positioned well below eye level suggesting that the observants were either sitting or kneeling. At Brympton, the position of a low squint in the north-west corner of the late 15th-century chapel is again of particular interest. Here, the squint is not situated near the location of a former altar. Instead, like at Yatton, its position provided a view of the chancel for a small number of people situated at the back of the chapel (Fig 2). The squint is situated at waist level (with no evidence for significant change in floor level) and therefore suggests that the observants were either sitting or kneeling. Furthermore, from this position every other altar within the church can be viewed; within the east end of this chapel, the altar in the north chapel, and south transept. Entered from its own doorway in the south wall the chapel is exclusive and provides a unique and commanding view of the major ritual areas of the church (incidentally the only position in the church that would enable this). Though physically separate, the addition of an internal window and the chancel arch to the north chapel indicate that the respective altars herein were still partially visible to the laity, whose participation was an important component for the efficacy of the intercessory mass.

The fact that many chapels and chantries were utilised by founders and later family members should not detract from the fact that such institutions were primarily intercessory foundations. Such an active role and presence of the founder could, it can be argued, have continued *post-mortem,* in that the deceased would be made present by the context of their chapel, and its symbolism, memorials and especially the ritual itself where *'the pronunciation of the name of the dead was more than simply recollection: it was the means by which the dead were made present'* (Geary 1994, 87). In many cases, the role of founder's or family tombs was a significant factor in certain intercessory rituals. At Yatton, as shown in Figure 1

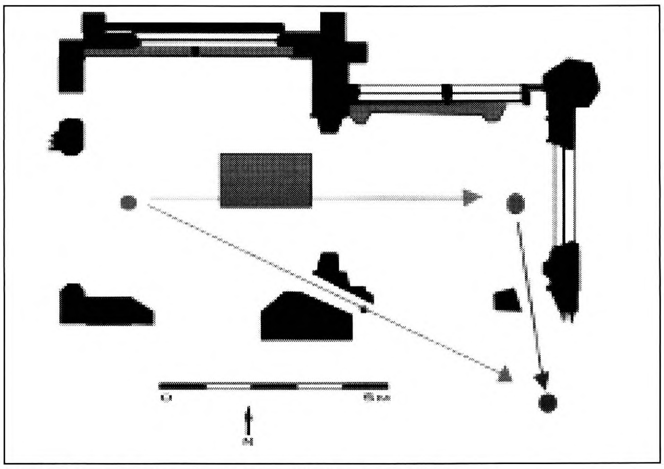

Fig 1 The north chapels at Yatton. The lines represent views from the back of the chapel (ie laity or individuals) to the altars and the visual relationship between the altars themselves

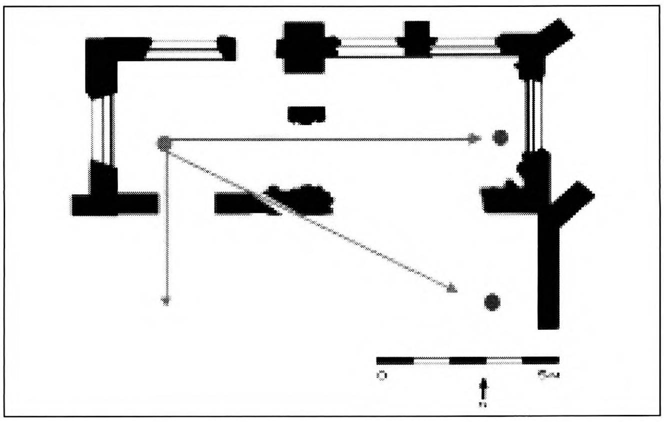

Fig 2 Brympton d'Evercy showing the conjectured position of individuals either seated or kneeling at back of chapel and respective views to altars in north-east chapel, chancel and across to south transept

plan, the tomb of Richard Newton and wife was highly visible and therefore symbolically present. Here, the tombs deliberately obstruct the line of sight to the chapel altar, acting as a firm reminder to those in the chapel. Similarly, at Mere (Wilts), the late 14th-century brass of John Bettisthorne, in the Bettisthorne chapel, is orientated with its head and inscription towards the west of the chapel, placed so as to be 'read' either by the officiating priest, or attendant laity within the chapel. In the second half of the 15th century the tomb chest of John, Lord Stourton, was inserted within the arcade between chapel and chancel. It is tempting to conjecture that perhaps another motive for placing the tomb in this position, besides proximity to the high altar, was to obstruct the line of sight from the chapel to the high altar, to act, as Graves has termed, as a *'presencing mechanism'* (Graves 2000, 142), thus placing the tomb and its occupant not only within the minds of the observing laity or priest, but actually within the physical sphere of the rituals observed. In the former Horton chantry at Bradford-on-Avon (Wilts), in the north aisle, there is a 20 metre long squint that extends through the north wall of the chancel to give a view of the high altar for the priest. This squint cuts through a 14th-century recess in the north wall of the chapel but more significantly inside the squint is placed an inscribed memorial slab. It may be suggested that the memorial is consciously placed, again to purposely intrude itself on the priest's line of sight and his interaction with the high altar. Consequently, it is a deliberate attempt to 'presence' one's memory in the eucharistic rituals taking place.

View-sheds, or lines of sight, are thus a highly significant factor in the negotiation of chapel and chantry space. The examination of chapel topography can reveal not just the relationship to parish church space, but also how this relationship may change over time. The Hampton chapel at Stoke Charity provides a particularly good example of this approach and provides an insight into the development and changing nature of ritual topography. The chapel has been said to date from at least the 15th century (Pevsner and Lloyd 1973, 613), although the chapel itself is probably of a much earlier date. In the 15th century the chapel became the Hampton family chapel and involved the reconstruction of parts of the structure including the insertion of an east window, the raising of the roof and the insertion of a wood-panelled ceiling. It was probably that at this time the 'mass of St Gregory' sculpture was placed within the north-east corner of the chapel, next to the chapel altar at the east end. The tomb altar of the chapel's founders, Thomas Hampton and wife, was placed within the archway leading from the chancel to the chapel. The location of the Hampton tomb altar between the arcade from chapel to chancel indicates a desire to make the monument visible not just from within the chapel, but also from the high altar as well as from the nave. Certainly it implies a desire for proximity to the high altar as the holier place (Fig 3).

In the early 16th century the chapel seems to have been subject to changes, namely the redirection of the liturgical focus in the chapel from the altar at the east end to a new tomb altar, that of John Waller, situated on the chapel's north wall. This tomb, with its elaborate canopy and niches, as well as evidence for a metal hook or 'riddel', presumably for a veil or curtain, may have also served as an Easter sepulchre, a common occurrence for many tombs of this period. The redirection of ritual focus also necessitated the insertion of a new window in the north wall to accentuate this new ritual space as well as the insertion of the double squint to permit people to see the table tomb from the nave. Such alterations inform us much about the changing nature of the chapel as well as providing comparative dating evidence, for the squint and window, which enables a chronological phasing to be constructed. Significantly, it also suggests that changes within chapel ritual geography also bore in mind the importance of communal visual accessibility, suggesting the public, as well as private, relationship to such monuments (Fig 4).

Similarly, at Buckland Dinham (Som), the addition of an eastern chapel to the Dinham north chapel also involved construction of a squint to enable the laity to have visual access to this new area. At Alton, two narrow squint windows in the east and west walls of the north chapel may have been inserted to allow the laity view of the altar from *outside* the chapel. These slit windows are also relatively low, suggesting that observants may have been kneeling to view the elevation within. It is significant that these windows are integral with the build of the chapel and therefore a conscious placement on the part of the founder rather than an afterthought.

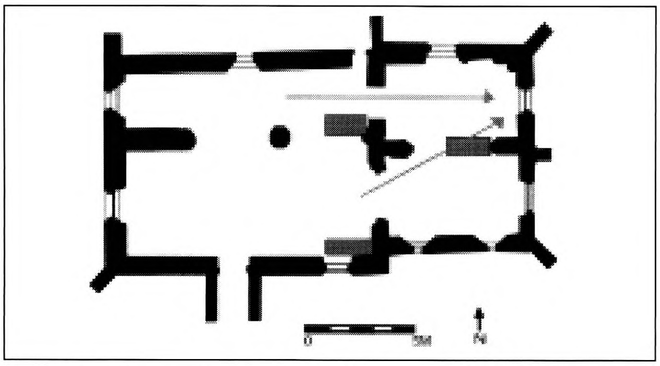

Fig 3 Stoke Charity in the 15th century. Showing views of laity from nave and north aisle into the Hampton chapel.

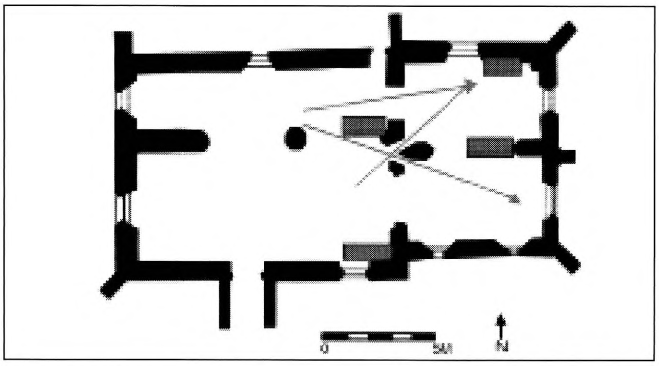

Fig 4 Stoke Charity in the early -16th century. Showing how the views of laity into the Hampton chapel are compensated for, with regard to the change in ritual focus to the Waller tomb in the north wall, by the addition of a double squint. The squint also gives a better view of the chancel from the north aisle.

Despite the fact that certain later chantries and chapels were located closer to the chancel, they were still accessible from more public areas of the church. Furthermore, it can be suggested that in some instances, and perhaps only on special occasions, the general laity may have obtained access to the chapel itself, and here certain primary historical documents can be used to support the archaeological evidence. Several churchwardens' accounts, for example, testify to the presence of seating arrangements in chapels. At Ashburton (Devon), money was provided for the making of *'a seat in the aisle of St Thomas'* (Butcher 1870, 19) and later in the *'aisle of St Mary'* (ibid 20). We are also informed that at Ashburton money was provided in 1539 for *'a deske'* (Butcher 1870, 26). Butcher describes this feature as a lectern, but it is equally possible that it was a *prie-dieu.* At

All Saints, Bristol, the churchwardens recorded that *'they made seats in the church before St Dunstan's altar'* (Burgess 1995, 14), very likely the site of the Halleway chantry (ibid 28). At Mere, we hear of *'tables, seats and a desk'* (Jackson 1885, 326), and in the will of John Stourton we are informed of the installation at his request of a *'reading desk'* by his tomb (Weaver 1901, 145). Evidence for substantial seating arrangements survive in the Tocotes and Beauchamp chapel at Bromham (Wilts) and in the south chapel at Bishopstone (Wilts). These seats appear to be integral with the construction of these chapels and were clearly able to seat a sizable number of people suggesting, in these cases, the presence of the laity on certain occasions. In the guild chapel of Our Lady at Wedmore, where membership was open to all townspeople, the bases of the arcade piers contain masonry seats. It is possible that the 'seats' referred to as being in front of St Dunstan's altar, or the Halleway chantry, at All Saints, Bristol may have been of the same, albeit more temporary form.

The space and size of certain chapels indicates that they were built to accommodate more than a priest and a few exclusive individuals. In many urban churches a significant amount of church space was appropriated by chapels and chantries. At St Thomas's, Salisbury, there were already 14 chantry priests attached to the church by 1394 (Tatton-Brown 1997, 104). This implies a potentially crowded and busy church in which lay access and participation could hardly be restricted in practice. In a smaller town like Old Basing, the north and south Paulet chapels are over two-thirds the size of the nave. At West Dean (Wilts) the Borbach chantry, which comprised the south aisle, accounted for nearly half of church space and in fact the aisle remains the parish church presently, due to the destruction of the old nave in the 19th century. It is likely, therefore, that many chapels and chantries were not necessarily totally off-limits to the laity. At Ashburton, the *'separate altars'* were often surrounded by *'minute bodies called lights sustained by groups such as "the maidens", "the bachelors" and the "married wives"'* (Rubin 1991, 141), indicating the indirect influence, and intimate contact, of the laity on the ceremonial setting of these altars. More specifically, William Caxton in the Doctrinal of Sapyence informs us that the laity *'stand so nyghe the aulter that they trouble oftimes the preest'* (in Duffy 1992, 112). The will of John Pympe of Nettleshead, Kent, requested that his parclosed chapel *'be of no more widnesse than is needful that oon halfe for the prest and his clerke that other halfe for theme that shall knel wtin'* (Livett 1909 in Graves 2000, 80), indicating that there were participants besides those involved in the liturgy present within the chapel. What can be seen in these instances is that the role of the general laity is implicit. In many cases this role was not one of mere passive observation, or sub-conscious assimilation and reaction to the complex rituals and symbolism, but also a role constituting active participation. Though chantries and chapels were founded and managed by individuals, or by specific collectives, they were very much public monuments and an important feature in communal piety. The spatial capacity of many chapels, evidence for seating arrangements, and the provision of squints to provide visual accessibility, suggests that in many cases chantries and chapels were highly public monuments. Accessibility was often from public areas of the church, such as the nave or aisles and, even when they were screened, provision was still made for visual accessibility at the very least. Chapels and chantries founded with the body of the church brought the setting of eucharistic practice out of the confines of the chancel and into the public domain.

In conclusion, this research provides an archaeological approach to the study of medieval chantries and chapels. It demonstrates how the application of archaeological techniques can be applied to the study of chantries and chapels in parish churches with only partial survival of evidence. It provides an original methodology for the recording of chantries and chapels, their fixtures and fittings as well as identifying patterns of location, spatial arrangement and the reconstruction of ritual topography. Consequently, this approach is used to investigate chapel and chantry foundation in the wider social context by examining inter-relationships between the religious and secular world and individual and communal piety. As a result, the structure of the methodology allows for both the objective recording of chapels as well as a level of subjective interpretation providing a framework for a functional and evolutionary interpretation of recorded evidence. Consequently, it is hoped that it will ensure a better understanding of how a particular medieval institution has come to be what it is, and allows an insight into the physical context of lay religious practice that is otherwise hinted at in largely historical sources.

A fuller descriptive account of the methodology together with *pro-forma* sheets and database of recorded examples can be accessed at www.wkac.ac.uk/archaeology ('current research')

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