

The churchwardens' accounts of St Andrew Hubbard, Eastcheap, and their implications

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SUMMARY

Churchwardens' accounts are an important, hitherto little used source of documentation for the churches in the City of London during the 15th and 16th centuries. These archives provide abundant information on parish activities during the period of the Reformation, shedding light on parish income from rents and collections, and expenditure on church fabric, fittings, liturgy and equipment. The churchwardens' accounts for the parish church of St Andrew Hubbard (c.1450–1620) are among the best preserved documents of this type and are of particular interest for two reasons. First, St Andrew Hubbard was a relatively small and poor parish; most surviving accounts relate to London's larger and wealthier parishes. Secondly, the church was destroyed by the Great Fire and never rebuilt; so the accounts furnish documentary evidence for a building and community which has long since disappeared.

INTRODUCTION

Damp, rodents and obsolescence are factors, among many others, which inevitably ensure that documentary evidence perishes with time; where ecclesiastical records are concerned, moreover, doctrinaire enthusiasm has, on occasion, prompted the intentional destruction of earlier 'aberrant' material. London, in addition, has suffered the cataclysms of the Great Fire and the Blitz; but, while the buildings of the medieval and early modern City have almost all been lost, a surprising volume of its contemporary archival material has been preserved. Indeed, where parish records are concerned, and compared with cities such as York and Norwich, an

encouraging number of London's parishes still have 15th and 16th-century churchwardens' accounts, or at least some other pertinent documentation, all of which can shed light on what was going on before and during the Reformation.¹ A good swathe of this material was printed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries but little use was made of it, at least until recently. In the last few years historians have actively sought a closer understanding of the church at local level before and during the 16th-century upheaval and, naturally, have been particularly exercised by developments in the capital. The following paper demonstrates what a close and, where possible, comparative study of parish materials can achieve and is particularly concerned with conditions on the eve of the Reformation.

THE CHURCHWARDENS' ACCOUNTS OF ST ANDREW HUBBARD AND ST MARY AT HILL COMPARED

Two adjacent parishes in Billingsgate ward, St Mary at Hill (see Fig 1, 18) and St Andrew Hubbard (see Fig 1, 16), each have surviving churchwardens' accounts for the later 15th century onwards, the former set of accounts effectively starts during the 1480s, and the latter during the 1450s. Each set has been in print for a century or more, although those for St Andrew Hubbard are in so obscure a journal, scattered over so many instalments, that they have remained, to all intents and purposes, inaccessible.² As well as subjecting both sets of

material to sustained scrutiny, I have recently transcribed the St Andrew Hubbard accounts afresh, and these are now published, together with the contemporary wills which survive for the parish, by the *London Record Society* (Burgess 1999).³ Work which I undertook on St Mary at Hill some years back dwelt on the structures of parish government in the later 15th century (Burgess 1996); my recent work on St Andrew Hubbard has been more wide-ranging, dealing, in addition, with items such as the original function of the surviving documentation and the impact of the Reformation. The two archives possess the advantage, from the historian's point of view, of complementing each other very effectively. St Mary at Hill, home to many fishmongers, was a relatively wealthy parish with a recorded income before the Reformation in the region of £100 per annum and houselling population of some 400 souls; it also housed some six or seven perpetual chantries by the later 15th century. St Andrew Hubbard, by contrast, had a much lower income to judge from the churchwardens' accounts, in the region of £10 per annum, and a houselling population of some 280; it had no perpetual chantries.⁴ To this extent, and perhaps ironically, St Andrew Hubbard, hitherto a relatively obscure parish (when compared to St Mary at Hill – a reputation in part resulting from the fact that St Andrew Hubbard, unlike its neighbour, was never rebuilt after the fire), presents the more intriguing prospect: few run-of-the-mill parishes have such a long set of accounts and fewer have been studied, even though they were presumably the more typical regime in terms of the City's parishes. St Andrew Hubbard repays sustained scrutiny: it transpires that the regimes of smaller parishes were more ambitious than has usually been assumed.⁵

THE PURPOSE OF CHURCHWARDENS' ACCOUNTS

It is worth establishing why churchwardens' accounts were compiled and preserved in the first place. As a result of initiatives in the course of the 13th century, church synods assigned to the laity the duties of maintaining the fabric of their parish churches and of providing and maintaining the equipment necessary for the proper celebration of the liturgy. The management of these duties eventually devolved on to

individuals within each parish, the churchwardens, and at any one time there were generally two of these to manage the laity's efforts, collecting rents and levies and ensuring that revenues were properly spent on fabric and equipment. Accounts enabled parishioners to check on their wardens in annual audits; in the longer term, they were to be preserved to enable the bishop, or one of his deputies, on visitation, to ensure that these responsibilities were being properly discharged.⁶ Surviving accounts, therefore, contain an abundance of information both on revenues, itemising rents, collections, charges and gifts, and on parish expenditure, itemising (often in great detail) the purchase and repair of equipment, vestments and books, and the maintenance or reconstruction of walls, roofs, widows and various fixtures and fittings and, year after year, entering the costs of keeping church and churchyard clean. Given that we are so often without basic information about parishes and parishioners both before and during the Reformation, churchwardens' accounts appear at first to offer an embarrassment of riches for those regimes whose records have survived. But caution is necessary. That the accounts contain an abundance of information is not to be gainsaid; but the over-riding problem is that we have no way of telling quite what proportion of any parish budget is being dealt with in any given set of accounts. While some have tended to work on the assumption that accounts offer a comprehensive impression of what was going on in any given parish community, close scrutiny of the St Andrew Hubbard accounts – and, indeed, of other sets – reveals that this was very much not the case.⁷ The churchwardens' brief was limited, to the maintenance of fabric and the provision of requisite equipment, but might be added to, as was deemed necessary, by any individual community. The problem that the historian faces is that he or she is not privy to all the detailed decisions taken and practices subsequently adopted in any particular parish. There are, then, two undefined variables to be taken into consideration when working with any set of churchwardens' accounts: first, there is no way of knowing quite what proportion of the parish budget they depict; and second, what had been adopted in one parish need not (indeed, almost certainly would not) apply in another.

The St Andrew Hubbard accounts reveal these problems with some clarity. They survive in two manuscript books: the first contains materials

from 1454 to 1523, and the second continues the run until 1621.⁸ The first book is written on uniform paper, save only the last quire, and is of relatively high calligraphic standard, although the last quire, containing accounts for c.1515–23, differs by being markedly less tidy than the greater part of the volume. The second book is written on a much greater variety of papers and is markedly less tidy, bearing all the appearance of an 'in house' production, some accounts probably being written by the churchwardens concerned. It also contains material in addition to the accounts, such as memoranda, information on various audits and lists of charges and levies. It is therefore the case that information on the decisions of parish government and on the personnel involved effectively becomes available only after 1525, even though it is transparent that parish government before 1525 was nevertheless both capable and sophisticated, which begins to suggest some of the pitfalls implicit in the documentation. Such intimations are well founded. Consideration of the majority of the accounts in the first volume leads to speculation: their very tidiness suggests that they were documents compiled in the form that they have come down to us, at least, as a celebration of churchwardens' achievements, urging other members of the laity to make similar sacrifices and work as hard for the parish as predecessors, whose records were hereby preserved, had done.⁹ The second book is much more a working record of parish finances and affairs. So, it is worth bearing in mind that churchwardens' accounts could be, and were, preserved for differing reasons, reasons which affected both content and appearance, but which remain unspecified.

It is worth pursuing this theme further, concentrating on the untidy accounts for c.1515–23 in the last quire of the first volume, material which I have referred to elsewhere as 'the rogue accounts'. These differ markedly from those which precede them in the first volume and from those which follow them in the second. It is, for example, eminently noteworthy that one or two of the 'rogue accounts' itemise each warden's responsibilities and achievements separately within a year's account; others have detailed records of the collections which were taken for the parish organ, for instance, which have no equivalent elsewhere in the entire run of accounts, or give detailed information about the procurement of lights which is similarly unparalleled. Elsewhere in the 'rogue accounts' there are

references to gatherings on Hock Monday and to church ales, which again are unique in the St Andrew Hubbard accounts, although referred to in so matter-of-fact a manner that it is obvious that they were entirely standard activities within the parish which, nevertheless, were ordinarily the responsibility of agents other than the churchwardens. The inescapable conclusion is that the rogue accounts, for whatever reason, preserve a much fuller impression of the life of the parish which is generally 'edited out' of the churchwardens' accounts as they have come down to us; or, to put it the other way round, that the general run of accounts offer, at best, a decidedly limited version of what went on in the parish. This is a deduction which can be further substantiated by examining the question of music provision within St Andrew Hubbard.

MUSIC IN THE CHURCH OF ST ANDREW HUBBARD

It is evident that, by the later 15th century, St Andrew Hubbard had organs, an organist, books of music and singers cumulatively indicative of a level of musical provision and performance which is surprising in a parish generally taken to be poor. The crux of the argument as it affects us, however, is that while there are sufficient references to music to suggest that provision in the parish was constant and of a reasonable standard, payments to musicians and for music are too small and too sporadic to account for the steady support which is more generally implicit. For instance, in the account for 1485–86, 2s was paid to Thomas, stationer, for writing 'the visitation of the Mass of the Visitation of Our Lady and the Mass of the same', an entry almost immediately followed by a payment of 4d 'for an organ player at the Nativity of Our Lady'. These entries are certainly suggestive of an adventurous liturgy and of seasoned performance, but both come out of the blue, with no previous reference to the purchase or provision of more rudimentary music. Moreover, whilst in the account for 1459–64, we encounter an expenditure of £5 8s 8d on organs, we only thereafter encounter very small, irregular payments to the organist, like the sum of 2d for a 'player on the organs' in 1465–66, or of 12d 'to the man who played the organs at Christmas' in 1466–68. Payments to singers, too, of pence or of a shilling for performances at specified liturgical feasts or

seasons, are similarly suggestive of ‘top-up’ payments. It is abundantly apparent that music is not dealt with in full in the accounts; all that emerges as having fallen within the churchwardens’ ambit is additional payments at certain times of the year. Clearly others had overall responsibility. And here it is worth reminding ourselves that the churchwardens’ brief was limited and, moreover, that music was not canonically required in the liturgy. St Andrew Hubbard, like other parishes in London and elsewhere, had other officers who were well able to collect for and pay for music. The second volume of churchwardens’ accounts reveals the existence of individuals, usually referred to either as auditors or assessors, who confusingly tended to refer to themselves as ‘the parish’ or ‘the parishioners’, who were the elite to whom the churchwardens were responsible.¹⁰ These were the men who, in all probability, were in charge both of the collections and payments necessary to support music within the parish, as they would also have been responsible for building or other provision in the parish which might similarly exceed that which was canonically necessary. Perhaps the clearest example of such responsibility is, in fact, to be found in a memorandum appended to the St Mary at Hill accounts for 1500. Although it is not referred to in the churchwardens’ accounts, ‘the parish’ that is the elite, had clearly taken the decision to rebuild the parish steeple, presumably for cosmetic rather than strictly utilitarian reasons, and it is striking that a previous warden, one Thomas Colyns, was in charge of the initiative. At the end of the account for 1500, a sum of £26 16s 5d was delivered to Colyns who, apparently, had primed the work on the tower from his own funds and, even after that payment, was still owed in excess of £11 for ‘expenses upon the masons’ workmanship and for stones for the steeple’. While the St Mary at Hill accounts deal with relatively large sums of money, other members of the parish, who were not currently churchwardens, were responsible for similarly large sums priming initiatives which were, presumably, surplus to what was strictly necessary but which, given the spiritual imperatives engendered by the importance which contemporaries attached to Purgatory, were embraced with enthusiasm by wealthier parishioners.

When proceeding with this model in mind, having clarified that, in ‘rich’ and ‘poor’ parishes alike, wardens were far from being responsible

for every aspect of parish life and provision, suddenly City parishes, which at first seem profoundly at odds one with the other, begin to exhibit strong resemblances. I do not seek to suggest that St Mary at Hill and St Andrew Hubbard were identical: it is abundantly clear that St Mary at Hill did have a much more sophisticated liturgy. But the point is that the churchwardens’ accounts for St Andrew Hubbard – a parish which, perforce, depended on collections, rates and charges, rather than on being able to top up such revenues with an endowment income – as was the case with St Mary at Hill – are nevertheless far from being comprehensive.¹¹ It may indeed have been the case that, as a collection regime, St Andrew Hubbard split up financial responsibilities between its wardens and its elite, or ‘parishioners’, more stringently than was the case in some other parishes and, as a result, we have a more than usually restricted, or modest, impression of life in such a parish when we rely on churchwardens’ accounts alone.

So, while the parish regime depicted in the churchwardens’ accounts for a parish like St Andrew Hubbard may look modest, and while it certainly was considerably less opulent than that for a parish like St Mary at Hill, it should not be judged excessively modest. It is indeed a possibility that impressions derived from its archives are particularly restricted. To judge from its musical provision, for instance, it was doing relatively well; and if one turns, finally, to examine the 1552 inventory, compiled prior to the confiscation of church goods by the Edwardian regime, it is striking just how much it had been able to amass, particularly in the way of vestments (Walters 1939, 146–50). It had less than St Mary at Hill but, by any more general standards, was richly equipped.

Given that St Andrew Hubbard was the more ‘typical’ parish, the conclusion, that more was being provided in and by the parish than one would at first ever surmise, is of importance. The undeniable limitations of first impressions as conveyed by its churchwardens’ accounts force us to revise our general assumptions as to the standard of liturgical provision in London before the Reformation, and revise upwards. In addition to St Paul’s, and all the monasteries, nunneries and friaries, to say nothing of the hospitals and almshouses in and around the City, London had 107 parishes within its walls. Whilst there were liturgical leaders among these parishes, and it is

worth remembering that parishes like St Dunstan in the East and St Magnus would have been able to mount a grander liturgy even than St Mary at Hill,¹² the lesson from St Andrew Hubbard is that poorer parishes in London were by no means humble. The liturgical and religious battery of London before the Reformation emerges as all the more considerable than would have seemed plausible – not that many have bothered to consider quite what the situation was in the City in this respect. But close and sensitive scrutiny of individual sets of churchwardens' accounts obliges us to face this problem and revise our impressions. The results are rewarding and salutary in equal measure; for they also oblige us to revise our assessments of the change at the Reformation which, accordingly, must have been all the more profound than assumed hitherto.

NOTES

¹ It is in this context worth drawing attention to a recent study based on a surviving late medieval parish inventory, as distinct from churchwardens' accounts, H. Combes 'Piety and belief in 15th-century London: an analysis of the 15th-century churchwardens' inventory of St Nicholas Shambles' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 48 (1997), 137–151.

² The accounts of the former were printed in *The Medieval Records of a London City Church, St Mary at Hill, 1420–1559* H. Littlehales (ed) Early English Text Society, 125 and 128, 1904–5; those of the latter were edited by J.C. Crosthwaite and printed in various instalments of the *British Magazine and Monthly Register of Religious and Ecclesiastical Information* between 1847 and 1849. The original manuscripts of both sets of accounts are in London's Guildhall Library. The history and architectural development of the church of St Mary at Hill are discussed in Jeffery (1996).

³ It is to be noted that while manuscript accounts are extant until 1621, I have not taken my transcription beyond 1570.

⁴ Juliana Fairhead had tried to establish a perpetual chantry for her husband, William, and herself in St Andrew Hubbard in the 1440s; it lasted for a decade or two but its income proved insufficient and it had to be abandoned. The parish thereafter enjoyed the benefit of an endowment income from the properties which Juliana had set aside to support the chantry, and this substantially augmented the income recorded in the churchwardens' accounts; the parish assiduously kept an elaborate perpetual anniversary to benefit the Fairheads' souls.

⁵ Attention should be drawn to an essay, which is fuller than the present paper and which deals in more

depth with many of the themes touched on here: C. Burgess 'London parishes: development in context' in *Daily Life in the Late Middle Ages* ed R. Britnell 1998, 151–174.

⁶ On the origins of the office of churchwarden, and the early function of both wardens and their accounts, see C. Drew *Early Parochial Organisation in England: the Origin and Office of the Churchwarden* (St Anthony's Hall Publications, vii, 1954), and also B. Kumin *The Shaping of a Community: the Rise and Reformation of the English Parish, c.1400–1560* (1996), especially Chapter 2. On episcopal visitation see for instance *Kentish Visitations of Archbishop William Wareham and his Deputies, 1511–1512* K.L. Wood-Legh (ed), Kent Records xxiv, 1984; D.M. Owen *Church and Society in Medieval Lincolnshire* 1971, 120–1; R.N. Swanson *Church and Society in Late Medieval England* 1989, 163–65, 256.

⁷ Kumin, *Community*, pp100–102 admits that much lay outside the competence of churchwardens' accounts but nevertheless proceeds towards statistical analysis on the delphic formula 'it is unlikely, however, that the surviving records present us with a completely deficient picture of communal activities'. R. Hutton *The Rise and Fall of Merry England: the Ritual Year 1400–1700* 1994, 49 also places the burden of proof on critics 'of showing why it is likely that a ceremony or celebration should have existed before a certain time either without incurring expense or without having that expense entered in accounts'. Both authors seem to assume that the churchwardens were at the head of the parish hierarchy and would oversee all that was going on; this, I would argue, is misguided. Churchwardens were agents, among others, with specific duties and they were responsible ultimately to the personnel who comprised the 'parishioners', or elite, who might themselves have managed much of what was not canonically required but deemed desirable in the particular circumstances of the parish.

⁸ Guildhall Library, London, Mss 1279/1 and 1279/2.

⁹ It is striking how the early accounts for St Andrew Hubbard resemble those preserved for All Saints', Bristol, and which are now to be found in the All Saints' Church Book; for this volume, and my comments upon it, see *The Pre-Reformation Records of All Saints', Bristol. Part I The All Saints' Church Book* C. Burgess (ed) Bristol Record Society Publications 46, 1995, ppxxvi–xxxvi, xxxviii–xli. This particular set of accounts – and it would appear the earlier accounts for St Andrew Hubbard – was copied so that the churchwardens 'should not be forgotten but had in remembrance and prayed for of all this parish', along with other parish benefactors and their good works. It is to be borne in mind that the doctrine of Purgatory meant that such commemoration was of prime importance before the Reformation.

¹⁰ I discuss such 'officers' as they operated in St Mary at Hill in more detail in my essay on that parish (Burgess 1996), and also in the introduction to my

volume on St Andrew Hubbard in the *London Record Society*.

¹¹ For a fuller discussion and analysis of the differences between endowments and collection regimes see Burgess & Kumin (1993).

¹² At least to judge from the mid 16th-century Chantry Certificate, which suggests that some of London's parishes had substantially more perpetual chantries established within them even than St Mary at Hill *London and Middlesex Chantry Certificate, 1548* C.J. Kitching (ed) London Record Society 16, 1980.

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