**TWELFTH PARISH SYMPOSIUM 2014: ABSTRACTS**

**Battles in the Belfry: The Late Medieval Bell Dispute at Wymondham Abbey**

*Kristi W. Bain (Northwestern University)*

In 1409, the Prior of Wymondham, Norfolk, petitioned the king’s bench for intervention in a dispute with parishioners who earlier that year had trapped him in his chambers after he had confiscated their church bells. Parishioners justified their actions by claiming that, without their bells and a proper belfry, the faithful were missing mass and their children were dying unbaptized. Legal proceedings continued for almost two years as parishioners fought for their bells and bell tower through violence, petitions, and litigation. Ultimately, the priory not only returned the parishioners’ bells to their small belfry but also granted them a license to build a newer and taller tower, with only minor fines for the damage their riots caused. Medieval and post-medieval sources evince that through this and other similar conflicts, medieval parish communities gained more control over the fabric of their churches, particularly over their belfries. Moreover, the two towers of Wymondham’s parish church, one belonging to the monks, the other to the parishioners, still dominate the town’s landscape and, together with local histories, have anchored the modern parish community in its turbulent medieval past.

Drawing on findings gathered from two years of archival and ethnographic research in Wymondham, this paper will examine the rich complexities of grassroots religious life in the late medieval parish. Moreover, I will demonstrate how this dispute and the resulting two bell towers at Wymondham gave parishioners an enduring collective identity. In particular, the great lengths to which parishioners went to secure rights over their bells and belfry reveal the integral role a peal of bells played in parish life and identity. More broadly, this paper will show how modern imaginings of the religious past are fundamental to how England’s communities perceive their medieval legacy, modern mission, and the value of medieval church buildings that remain as the center of community life.

**Context, comment and outlook**

*John Harper (University of Bangor)*

In this final session, John Harper will set out to place the soundscape in the wider context of visual, sensory and emotional experience, and to distinguish the experence of different groups in different parts of the church. He will also bring together some of the themes explored during the day, and reflect on possibilities for future study and investigation.

**The remarkable soundscape of the pilgrimage church of Wezemaal (Brabant, Belgium) in the 15th and 16th centuries**

# *Bart Minnen, PhD*

Wezemaal is a medium sized village in Belgium, near the town of Leuven. Since 1234 the pastoral care of the St Martin’s parish lay in the hands of three regular canons of the Norbertine abbey of Averbode. During the 15th century, the church became the most important pilgrimage place of St Job in the Low Countries. As St Job was also the saint patron of musicians in those days, it is not surprising that much attention was paid to the musical framework of his devotion. During the 15th and 16th centuries, the worship of St Job became surrounded by a remarkable soundscape that surpassed by far that of a simple village church.

The sounds themselves we cannot bring to life again. But thanks to the rich sources that survived, both written and iconographic, it is possible to uncover the various elements of which this soundscape was composed.

Each year, around the 10th of May, the feast of St Job, the church was crowded by people of all ranks, praying, singing, begging for healing, bringing gifts and buying souvenirs. Besides the three Norbertine priests, the church fabric allowed many secular priests to provide religious services. Companies of musicians established in the nearby towns of Leuven or Mechelen not only accompanied the processions and the mystery play of St Job, but also played music inside the church. The instruments they handled can still be recognized on the pilgrim badges of Wezemaal, showing St Job rewarding three musicians who try to comfort him with their music.

In 1514, when the pilgrimage reached its peak, a choir of nine priests was established in the church, accompanied by six choristers who were tonsured and dressed in a red tabard. The choir regulations are preserved, so we know what they sung and what payments they received.

Refusing to accept the new reality after 1520, when the devotion to St Job suddenly collapsed, the church kept on trying to attract pilgrims. In 1563 a carillon was assembled out of no less than fourteen bells, six of which came from the French town of St Quentin after its capture by the Spaniards in 1559.

This marvelous soundscape fell silent when the church was burned down in 1579 amidst the darkest years of the Eighty Year’s War. Its memory lived on for a while, but the reconstructed vaults after 1600 would never again echo the rich sounds from the past.



**English Catholic Soundscapes: The case of Little Crosby, 1580-1640**

*Emilie K. M. Murphy (York)*

What did it sound like to be a Catholic in early modern England? This paper will begin to answer this question by focussing on the village of Little Crosby in the parish of Sefton, a few miles north of Liverpool. The soundscape of this uniquely Catholic village, like the majority of villages, towns and cities in early modern England, was filled with the singing of ballads. Ballads have almost exclusively been treated in scholarship as a “Protestant” phenomenon and the ‘godly ballad’ associated with the very fabric of a distinctively Protestant Elizabethan and Stuart entertainment culture. If the dominant scholarship is to be accepted, ballads were *about* Catholics, not *by* them. Yet this paper will reveal how Catholics utilised ballads to voice social, devotional and political concerns by focussing on the music preserved in two manuscript collections: the Blundell family commonplace book, the *Great Hodge Podge,* and a hitherto anonymous manuscript collection preserved in the British Library, Additional MS. 15,225.

This paper will reveal how it was through sounds that English Catholics forged their individual and communal identities during this period. The ballads performed in Little Crosby reveal a festive, communal and vibrant Catholic community, within which musical expression was fundamental. Performance of the music within the manuscripts served to widen the parochial religious divide, whilst enhancing Catholic integration. This paper will also reveal the way that Catholics used sounds to voice religious politics, as several pieces were pointedly subversive and demonstrate that music enabled Catholics to exhort protest as much as prayer. Finally, by investigating the tunes and melodies preserved in the manuscripts, this paper will reveal how priests serving the Catholic network facilitated by the Blundells through Little Crosby, used ballads as part of their missionary strategy to evangelise the beleaguered English Catholic laity.

**Consistory court cacophony: What their records can contribute to our knowledge of the 17thC soundscape**

*Andrew Thomson (Winchester)*

Surviving consistory court books offer one of the best ‘soundtracks’, albeit from a ‘criminal’ perspective, of the common people and the noises they made in Early Modern England. Surprisingly there are relatively few studies of consistory court operations covering the whole of the seventeenth century. This ‘paper’, based on on-going research over three dioceses of the Southern Province, will focus on graphic examples, from the court books, of parochial behaviour and the impact they made on the seventeenth century ‘soundscape’.

**Here and there, before and after: some thoughts on parish music in England and France, 1400-1700**

*Magnus Williamson (Newcastle)*

In histories of the parish soundscape the field of investigation tends to be demarcated geographically by the English channel and chronologically by the religious upheavals of the mid-sixteenth century. Without pretending to offer helpful answers or a coherent methodology, this paper will investigate some (dis)continuities between the pre- and the post-Reformation musician, from the clericulus to the west gallery musician; and some (dis)similarities between English and French experiences.

**Music in the post-reformation English parish church: a theme and variations**

*Jonathan Willis (Birmingham)*

The prevailing sense of parish church music in the decades following the Elizabethan Settlement of Religion is (more or less) of an abrupt decrescendo, followed by a deafening silence. The splendours of the English musical renaissance – Byrd, Tallis, Gibbons – were the exceptions that proved the general rule, and the enchanting sounds of the Elizabethan cathedrals and chapels royal were literally a world apart from the monotonous droning of the tone-deaf congregations of the urban and rural English parish. This view is of a kind with a broader sense that English Protestantism – and particularly Puritanism – were inimically hostile to the arts: visual, dramatic, mimetic, literary and musical. The 1580s, we have been told many times, marked a ‘cultural watershed’, a ‘second reformation’, a transition from ‘iconoclasm’ to ‘iconophobia’. According to this schema, affection for the sorts of cultural artefacts mentioned is frequently taken by historians to signify either the presence of backward-looking, conservative, ‘traditional’ (read: crypto-Catholic) sympathies or, conversely, an innovatory, destabilising and ‘proto-’ avant-garde conformism (Laudianism’s ‘parochial roots’).

This paper will explore the fate of music in the post-reformation English Church through a series of parochial case studies. It will suggest that taking the local context seriously problematizes some of the grand narratives mentioned above. Post-reformation musical provision was not simply a barometer of parochial religious feeling: it was also a reflection of social, economic, political and cultural concerns. And insofar as the music of the parish church was in part conditioned by religious belief, the relationship between the two was far more complex than the quadrilateral of conservative/conformist/Puritan/proto-Laudian suggests. The success of the Elizabethan settlement in part lay in the fact that it allowed for a surprising amount of community control, and therefore local variation, in certain aspects of religious worship, of which music was perhaps the most prominent. This success, however, was built on a foundation of institutionalised instability. Paradoxically, it was only when this instability was removed in the first part of the seventeenth century that the whole elaborate edifice came crashing to the ground.