

Lucus non lucendum: Windows in chancels to 1399

Courtauld Institute of Art conference 'Towards an Art History of the Parish Church, 1200-1399'

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This phrase 'Lucus non lucendum' is a Latin play on words:

- a '*lucus*' is a shady grove in the middle of a wood that does not necessarily receive much light
Windows need to be studied in relation to the light they give at different times of day, and (therefore) their positioning and height, and not just as vehicles for stained glass or fine tracery.
- The ideal of any lecture should be '*lucendum*' - to enlighten.

We hope that this talk will throw light onto a 'shady' area of research.

This short lecture has two aims:

First, to see windows in medieval churches as sources of light.

Second to look at what they were intended to light; in other words why they were placed where they are - or were.

Play of light at Cawston, Norfolk

The east chancel window lighting the rood-loft staircase



This first point – looking at medieval windows as sources of light - isn't perhaps as obvious as it might seem. They have mostly lost their original glass, so we do not know either what their iconography was or how much light their original glass let through. One thing is certain, though, and that is that their iconographical content and their light put-through would have been carefully considered and balanced. Everything we know about medieval design is that it was functional and appropriate as well as didactic.

Windows for lighting



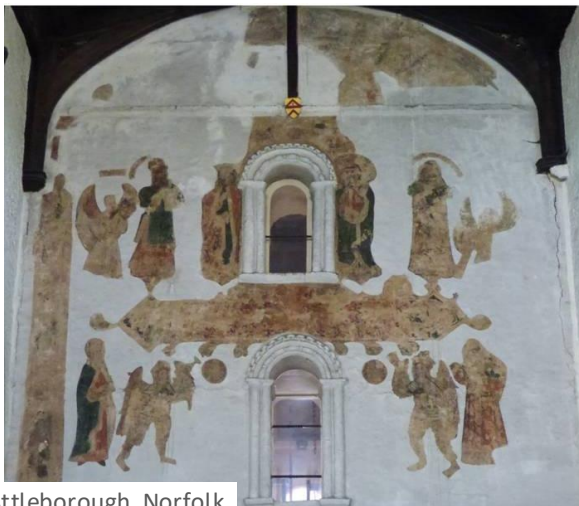
Orwell, Cambs, chancel c1396
Photograph taken 8th Sept 11.08 BST



Chaddesden, Derbys, chancel c1357

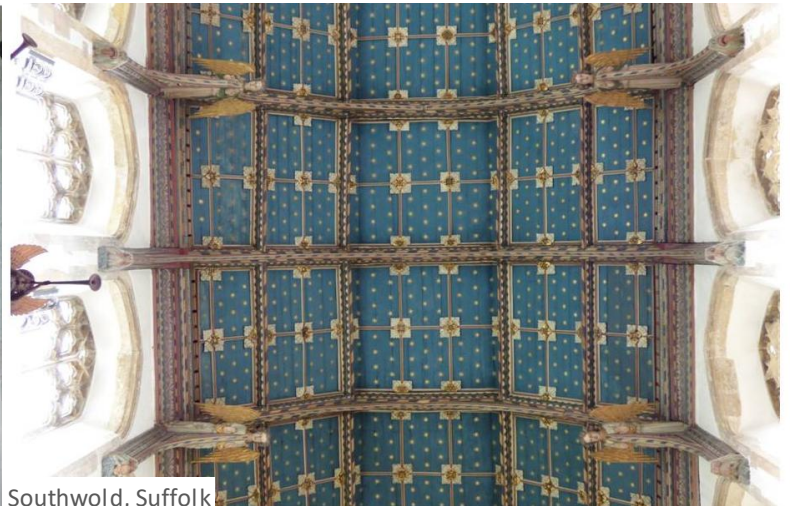
It is also important to understand the visual context of medieval glazed windows. They were placed among colour on the walls surrounding them, colour on the ceilings above them,

Colour on walls



Attleborough, Norfolk

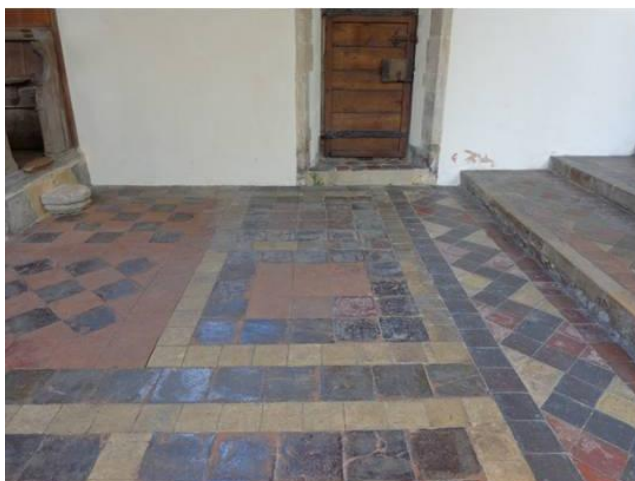
Colour on ceilings



Southwold, Suffolk

and on the floor below them.

Colour on floors: the gathering space



Salle, Norfolk



as well as on the furniture and fittings inside churches, especially in their chancels.

Colour on screens



Bridford, Devon

This suggests that the windows themselves did not need to be coloured very much, either darkly or even brightly. But when the C19 'restorers' came to deal with windows they did so in the context of unfurnished and whitewashed buildings.

Many Victorian and later architects and artists seem to have seen windows chiefly as opportunities for importing colour into a neutral background.



Whitewashed building



St John, Duxford, Cambs

This has tended to warp and falsify our view of medieval colour arrangements. It has also tempted us to forget the basic medieval rationale for placing windows – that is, to satisfy the need for light at particular places in the chancel and at particular times of the working day as the sunlight moved in relation to it.

Dark Victorian glass, C21 lighting



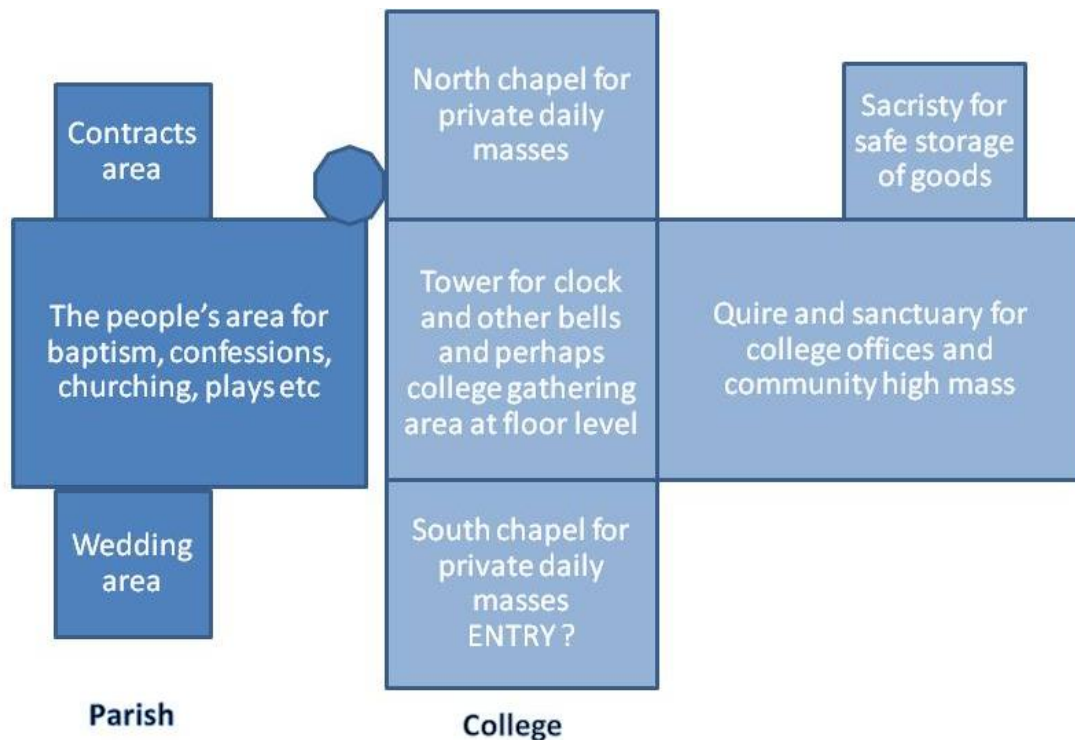
Wisbech, Cambs



Rye, Sussex

And that brings me to the second point: that medieval designers placed windows with great care, just as they did entry doors and openings in fittings such as screens. The fact that most churches used the same ceremonial Use of Salisbury meant that similar entry, circulation and storage areas were all needed. These were in fact provided with remarkable consistency, though always with local variations.

Parish and collegiate church: dual use of space, Shottesbrooke



But the gradual elaboration of ceremony and especially music also meant that changes were made to accommodate these, and windows too were adapted to the new demands, as we will see.

It is also our thesis today that the problems of dating buildings might be alleviated by considering all these infrastructural matters as a whole. By looking carefully and with understanding at all the surviving artefacts, we might come to a coherent sense of the evolution of these fascinating buildings. Therefore we are now going to look at the reasons for medieval windows to see if these reasons can enlighten our understanding of the dating and evolution of C13 and C14 chancels.

Singers at work



Fairford, Glos

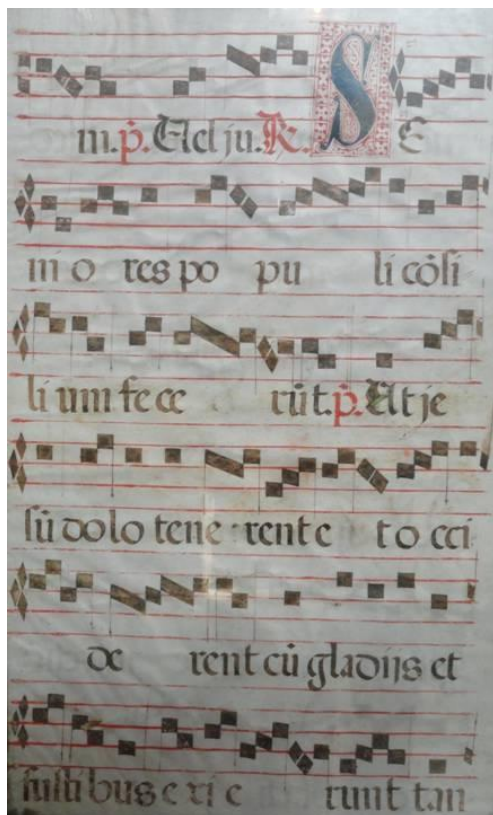


Gloucester abbey, Lady chapel:
'chorista' music ledge
with graffiti!

Arundel MS

First, though, the chancel has to be considered as a work place: here offices and masses were sung from eight to ten times a day, three to five hours a day or more; here the whole psalter was sung every week, by heart, in monodic plainsong - a practice dating back to the foundation of the Christian church. St Augustine said that 'to sing was to pray twice', but he was reflecting a much older practice.

Why the psalter? Because all human life is there, and all possible existential questions are raised in the psalms.



Monodic plainsong

at Swaffham, Norfolk

Plainsong needs resonance to make it effective and produce incidental harmonies - and got it in chancels when their windows were small in relation to nicely reverberant wall areas.

When windows were made larger, this resonance started to disappear because glass absorbs sound waves rather than reflecting them.

Polyphony

Old Hall MSS

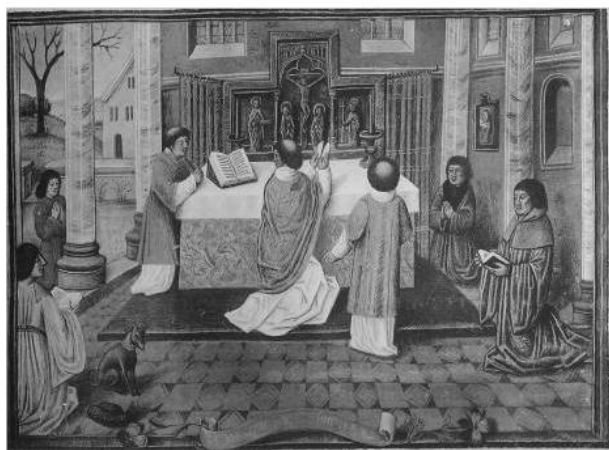
Eton choirbook



Did polyphony start in poor acoustics, as for instance (and notoriously, as musicians know) at Notre Dame, Paris?

Chancels were designed to house a multitude of activities by a potentially large number of people in clerical orders.

Busy chancels



*The booklet of the mass 1507,
Brother Gherit van der Groude*

There were priests, deacons and sub-deacons to sing the daily offices with the other singers and probationary servers and singers in the quire stalls. In the sanctuary there were servers, acolytes, thurifers, crucifers, and holy-water clerks to accompany the priests, deacons and sub-deacons in their performance of masses. All these were called 'choristas', meaning those who served in the quire and sanctuary. They were in fact 'clerks' in various orders from the lowest to the highest, and were ordained and tonsured – and took advantage of Benefit of Clergy, naturally.

In addition there were sacristans and night-watchers, also working several hours a day – and night – and all 365 days of the year.

A chancel's design must allow music to be sung with ease and heard distinctly – a challenge for any acoustic engineer. It also must allow for the free and well-lit flow of all those engaged in complex ceremonial – this liturgical choreography is, like the singing of psalms etc, an essential part of communal life. And the design must make sure that, when needed, music and other books can be read with ease at all hours of the day, from dawn to dusk.

Windows are crucial to vision but, being absorbent, also affect acoustics, so these two differing needs have to be reconciled somehow.

Singers of polyphony, men and boy



C14 music lectern, Orvieto



from the Ranworth
Antiphoner, c1478



Chester cathedral west door

Stall design however incorporated 'reredoses' to improve middle-level resonances

Reredoses and stalls

Astley, Warws



Trunch, Norfolk



and acoustic jars seem to have been placed to filter out unwanted high-level 'rogue' harmonics.

Acoustic jars

Sandwich, St Clement, Kent



So the final design of a chancel is the result of reconciling a fairly complex set of interacting necessities, using all surfaces – walls, floors and ceilings – to produce a good place to sing in.



A good chancel to sing in

Walpole St Peter, Norfolk

All these are the parameters of a working building, but how did these buildings evolve as places of work? Here is a very brief background history:

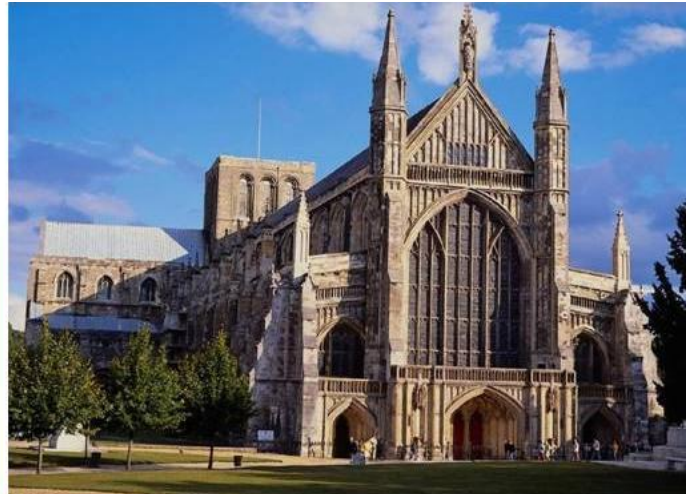
The first places to accommodate collegiate groups of clerks were minsters in cities and towns, from which groups of priests and clerks ministered to the surrounding population. We know something of the design of minster churches but little about how they were lit.

Winchester minster and the cathedral

Computer model of the Old Minster



Winchester monastic cathedral



The managers of the 1066 Conquest made monasteries more powerful than 'anglo-saxon' minsters, some of the 'secular' minsters being converted into 'cloistered' monastic cathedrals, a procedure unique to Britain.

Diocesan and parochial systems were fully established (with many anomalies) by the end of the C13.

From early times, and especially following the C11 reforms of Gregory VII (pope from 1073 to 1085), the eight daily offices and the various daily masses were sung in every church. From this time forward, the staple musical diet of the Western Church was Roman plainsong, a single line of music which had to be learned by heart by every aspiring singer. For this daily performance few books were needed, therefore no special lighting either. But churches then were usually relatively resonant places, good for performing plainsong monody.

Sometimes early chancels were vaulted. In some places vaulting was prepared but never placed, as at Stone in Kent or Blockley in Gloucestershire. I wonder why not? If the vaulting had been completed, might the building have been too resonant?

By the time the parochial system was in place, so was the increasingly complex ceremonial which followed the forms set out in the various Uses. Of these, the Salisbury Use became the predominant one in England and Wales.



c1200 chancel

Crandall, Hants

This period also saw the beginnings of polyphony, at first quite simple, consisting of simply-improvised vocal lines above and below the plainsong, a practice that quickly became normalised and then elaborated.

Small windows in early C13 chancel

Littlebourne, Kent



Chancels in several churches around Canterbury were rebuilt early in the C13, at Littlebourne, Ickham and Eastry, whose advowsons were held by the two major Canterbury monasteries. They were all provided with lancet windows, and planned on quite a grand scale, as if many celebrants and singers were expected to use them.

Injunctions from the 1290s (from bishop Quivil, Exeter) and from the early 1300s (from archbishop Peacham) expected the parish faithful in every church to provide their clerks with at least 11 books, of which 8 were music books. There is early documentary evidence of these music books (or rolls) being in parish churches, such as at Branscombe, Devon by 1307:

Unus rotulus de canto organico magnus et longus, Organa ex dono Vicarii

[A long and large roll of choral polyphonic music, called 'Organa', given by the Vicar of the church]

Other churches also show modifications to allow more light at west end of chancels where books now have to be read in poor or early daylight.

Low side windows to light music at Matins



Sopley, Hants



Billingford, Norfolk



Bury,
Cambs

north



south



Gamlingay, Cambs

Branscombe, Devon: west end of chancel, north and south side windows with shutters



These low windows, as at Branscombe, and in other places, had shutters for security, being otherwise vulnerable to thieves – whose presence in communities is well documented.

Quire stalls at Gamlingay, Cambs



Reredoses and low side windows, south and north

In the quire stalls at Gamlingay, you can see that there is a shutter, actually the reredos back of one of the south quire stalls, that can be raised to allow light in here. Perhaps that was a solution that was adopted quite often; we have relatively few sets of stalls that are still complete with their reredoses, so we cannot be completely sure about this.

C13 chancel with later west windows



In other churches, windows at the west end of chancels were simply replaced by larger ones to let more light into where the stalls of the senior clergy were, as in this church with a large C13 chancel near Canterbury.



Ickham, Kent

Shottesbrooke college, Berks 1330s



From the 1220s onwards, local lords began to find it convenient to endow their own chantries and educational centres, setting up local colleges rather than using monasteries. These might be new buildings, as here at Shottesbrooke, or they might be based in parish churches.

Cotterstock college, Northants, 1338 onwards



Larger windows all round ; large sacristy and college house next door (to right)

Either way, their increased ceremonial and personnel meant that larger chancels with larger and lighter windows were needed, especially those founded by prelates who would naturally expect the best of music and ceremony to be taught and performed in the m.

Colleges founded by prelates

Higham Ferrers PC, 1220-80 & 1325-1350



Winchester, 1380s

The founder-patrons' purchasing power and their wide social connections often meant that the most skilled masons were available to build for them, so the latest style of larger windows were introduced.

High glass to wall ratio mid C14

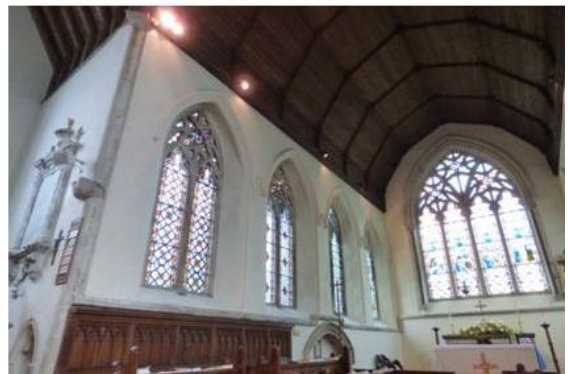
Lawford, Essex



And here the tension between the absorption of glass and the need to provide a good singing acoustic becomes more acute. But luckily musical developments, the singing of improvised polyphony and, by the middle of the C14, also written polyphony, meant that the old resonance was no longer so vital, or even required. Singers now needed to hear each other distinctly while singing individual parts in polyphonic music.

Large parochial 'singing chancel'

Chartham, Kent, early C14



By the very early C14, even more modest parish churches have un-expectedly large windows in their sizeable chancels. With quite a number of these, we think we have the right to suspect that these were also collegiate in some sense, even if there are no extant collegiate statutes. They appear to have been built to be served by a large staff, anyway, since they have ample transepts even when (as here at Chartham) there was not a central tower. These cruciform churches share this characteristic layout with many specially-built college churches, their transepts allowing for the extra altars needed by a large community of clerks, singers and priests. This is a practical plan, not a symbolic one – again, we need to get away from anachronistic Victorian ideas which can so often seduce us if we are not careful.

Fine chancel added to 'normal' nave



Sandiacre, Derbys, chancel c1342-7

Every county has examples of fine chancels added to normal naves. One of the most unexpected is the one at Sandiacre in Derbyshire, where a very plain but large and tall Norman nave gives onto an incredibly light and spacious C14 chancel. There are a number of such places in the east midlands and, again, all these imply a considerable staff of clerks.

Smaller chancels with larger west windows

**Westbere, Kent, south chancel
outside and inside early C14:
lower west, and higher east, windows**

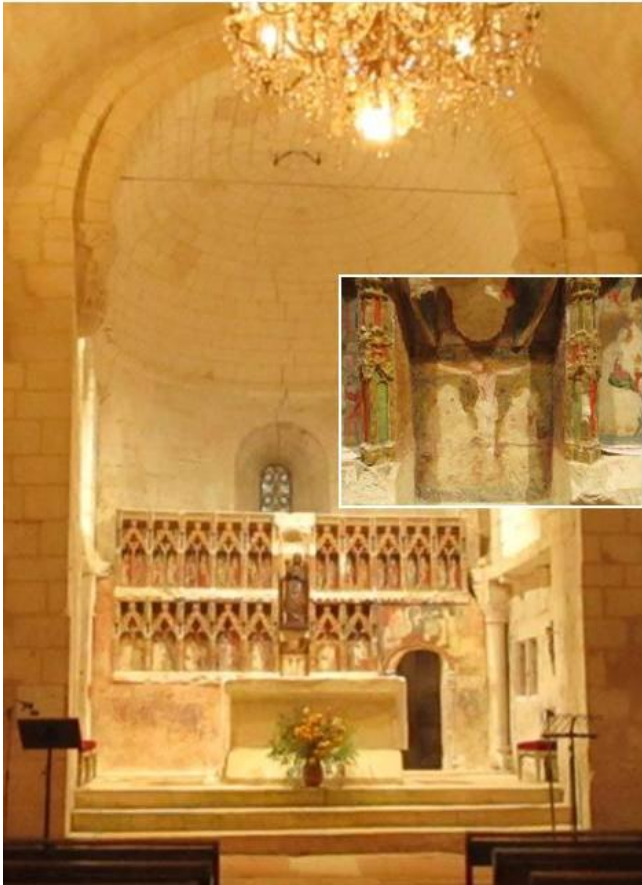


**South Courtney, Berks, north
and south chancel outside C13
with later C15 west windows**



But their designers always needed to consider where exactly to place windows, and how high their sills needed to be. Look at the south side of chancels of even quite 'humble' churches and you will see a variation of window sill heights. This is important evidence, because in many places these sill heights are the only remaining testaments to now-missing quire stalls and sedilia.

Audignon, Landes, France: 'English' retable



Retables

Position of retable

Swine,
Yorks ER

Sill level



In addition, the height of sills of the east windows in sanctuaries and side chapels can tell us where altars and their retables were placed, and how wide they were, even where their original mensas have long gone.

Retable at Thornham Parva, Suffolk



(Though it has to be borne in mind that the heights from floor to sills have very frequently been altered by later floor level changes. A major clue to these changes is often the absurdly low height of a piscina from the ground. These floor level changes have to be factored in carefully in any reconstruction of the original arrangements.)

c1400: Norbury, Derbys



Large chancel windows with basically original glass, allowing plenty of light (north side shown) into parochial church

‘Singing chancels’ (as we call them) were well lit, as we can see from surviving ranges of later C14 glass, as here at Norbury, another large east midlands chancel.

These windows, of what we call ‘grisaille’ are obviously meant to allow light in both below and above their middle ranges of saints, or shields: the lower lights for reading music books in the quire stalls and no doubt the upper lights to show off the painted ceilings above. Here is the east window of Selling in Kent, in the same style and at the same date as Norbury, just at the end of the period we are considering today.

c1400: Selling Kent



East window: large sanctuary lighting with original glass

I would go as far as suggesting that grisaille glass was actually deliberately introduced at the time when music and ceremonial were being greatly enhanced, towards the end of the C14. Surely this can't be just pure coincidence?

This enhancement of music and ceremonial was the church's response to criticism by Wycliffe and the Lollards (and Langland and Chaucer). It is clear from documents – especially inventories – that written-down polyphony and a more general installation of organs appear in many churches from the 1380s onwards.

Increasing wealth, then decreasing wealth



**Bishop's Sutton, Hants: lancet replaced by larger window;
this window blocked for north building (sacristy/chantry); building demolished.**

Finally, because they are related to these enhancements, we need to consider missing buildings and blocked windows. Here – in a church next door to a country residence of the bishop of Winchester – is a complex but by no means unique example. It seems that a western lancet window was replaced by a larger window, and that this in turn was blocked up when a new north building was put up to house a sacristy or perhaps a private chantry or chapel. This building was demolished later, leaving its piscina outside.

Decreasing wealth after 1547 = lost buildings



Etchingham, Sussex, 1360s onwards



Bassingbourn, Cambs, mid C14

A two-storey building added here at Bassingbourn (on the right) involved the shortening and blocking of its NE window. These often now-missing additions are sometimes difficult to interpret and have usually been ignored by historians. But their previous existence is a vital part of the history of a church, and they have to be accounted for, as do the examples of such additions as remain.

Roos, Yorks ER, two-storey NE 'Dec' building

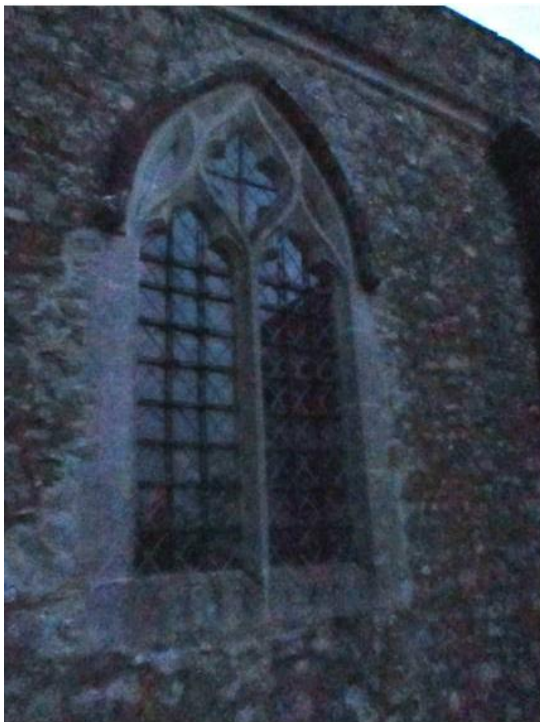
East windows of NE building



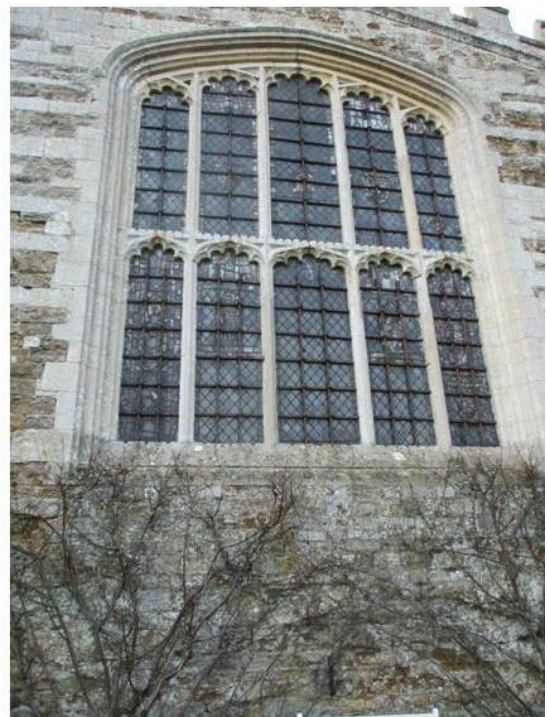
At Roos, in the part of Yorkshire east of Hull, there is an early example of just such a building, apparently designed as part of the chancel when it was rebuilt in the later C14. From its upper floor, through a large opening into the chancel, the lord's family from the nearby castle could watch the ceremony at the altar – and no doubt keep a wary eye on their people in the nave, too.

This kind of extra building came later to have other uses in other places beyond the chronology of this talk, but their ground floor provided accommodation for vestries, sacristies and treasuries and sometimes chantries too.

Increasing wealth = increasing security



Ulcombe, Kent, west window south aisle



Noseley college, Leics., east window

Evidence for all this will need to be teased out carefully, but the placing, size and extent of windows, and the security arrangements provided for windows and doors in these buildings are all clues as to their original designed intended uses.

I'm going to conclude with a very quick look at just one church which picks up a number of the points made during these last few minutes – at Orwell in Cambridgeshire.

Orwell, Cambs, chancel south side begun 1399



Here we know that the present chancel was built at the expense of the rector, Richard Anlaby, who died in 1396. His motive may have possibly been to commemorate Sir Simon Burley, lord of the manor, a victim of the Merciless Parliament and executed in 1388. He had been tutor to Richard II, and held high offices including the Wardenship of the Cinque Ports. This was a particularly nasty moment, when the de la Poles and many other families suffered. Geoffrey Chaucer simply disappears about this time, too, incidentally.

All this we know, but there are questions to ask about Orwell. Was it in effect a collegiate chantry chancel, with around 22 quire stalls originally?

Orwell, surviving quire stalls



(There still are 16 stalls and there would have been 6 more 'return' stalls against the rood screen, now gone.)

If so, was the previous chancel simply too small for a more elaborate commemorative liturgy, or had it the wrong acoustics for the new music, or was too dark with small windows for written music to be sung from? The new chancel is a double cube, based on a 20' module, perfect for clear acoustics at the normal pitch-range of the male singers.

Orwell, north-east building



A clue to its being a rich foundation is its built-in NE building, used to store precious altar and sacramental goods and vestments. There would also be room above these to accommodate the two large bellows of a later organ placed on the north side of the chancel, on the 17' 6" length of blank wall there,

Orwell, barred east chancel window

Orwell, inside north wall of chancel



but that is a story that belongs to a later date.

Another clue is the barring of the chancel windows. This is another feature that has not been studied much, though it is highly indicative that there was wealth inside any given church, and especially local colleges, which needed to be protected.

This kind of set-up was to become very typical in the century and a half to come, before the Latin church came to an end in 1548, and their buildings were no longer appropriate to their new uses. Since then 450 years have elapsed, long enough for us to have forgotten how their infrastructural designs functioned in daily use.

Tideswell, Derbys, chancel c1360-80



So to date C13 and C14 chancels with greater accuracy needs a combination of approaches: archaeology, liturgy, history, the functional architecture of chancels and above all, of course, the music itself.

Our soundsmedieval research has been carried out by visiting, measuring and investigating many aspects of churches that have not been researched before, using this combination of approaches.

Norbury, Derbys



This research has, as we have seen, included looking at buildings and furnishings that have lost their original functions or have even disappeared altogether, often leaving only a few clues as to their former existence or function. The expenses incurred in all this research work were generously supported for three years by The Society of Antiquaries of London.

We will be publishing at least three books as a result of our work and beg you to be patient while we find the time between working and lecturing to write these!

The future of chancels in the C21?

- **Sustainability - lack of congregations**
- **Acoustics - use for music (again)**
- **New uses (old ones in fact) for chancels, as naves return to their secular uses?**

We are all still waiting for the delayed results of the government's consultation over the future sustainability of churches. It has become all the more vital that we understand them thoroughly as functional buildings. They are still capable of functioning – perhaps again in ways more similar to the ways in which they were intended by their medieval designers – and let's hope they will carry on doing so for a long time to come, if they are allowed to do so with the sort of care, understanding and good judgement with which they were originally built.



Survey visits to about 10% of all surviving medieval churches in England and Wales, 2012 to present.

Supported with expenses grants from the Society of Antiquaries, 2013-2016.

About 700 detailed, dimensioned surveys of churches with documentary evidence for music before the 1540s and surviving medieval chancel parts.

About 150,000 photographs.

Study of windows is only a tiny part of our research ... see our website.

Thank you all for listening.