

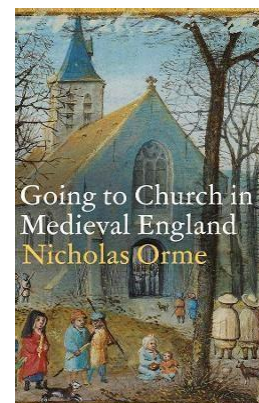
Nicholas Orme

Going to Church in Medieval England

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A fascinating and informative insight into the lives of ordinary churchgoers between the C4-16th.

Summary by Alison Morgan



1. Origins and the parish

In 313 AD Constantine recognised Christianity as a lawful religion and allowed it to have permanent public places of worship. In 314 AD 3 British bishops attended a council at Arles – bishops from London, York and probably Lincoln, which suggests there were churches there, and probably also in towns such as Exeter, St Albans, Silchester.

Roman rule collapsed in the mid 400s; cities were deserted, people left for the countryside, pagan Anglo-Saxons invaded and created small kingdoms in the eastern half of Roman Britain.

In the 6th century Aethelberht, King of Kent, married the Christian daughter of the king of the Franks. Bertha brought a bishop with her, and Pope Gregory the Great followed this by sending Augustine of Canterbury in 597 – which led to the conversion of Aethelberht and his nobility. By the 680s the whole of England was nominally Christian.

Between 600-900 AD churches staffed by religious communities of monks and priests were founded in England, starting with Christ Church Canterbury. The Latin *monasterium* referred to a religious community, and so these became known as minsters. After 900 historians distinguish between monasteries (lived in by monks) and minsters (staffed by priests). The reason for this format was that England had lost most of its towns, so a church had to be a little town of its own.

Interaction between clergy and laity began with baptism, initially adults but then children, starting with Eanfled, daughter of K Edwin of Northumbria. The other ministry of travelling clergy was teaching & preaching, important for Christianising people before there were many local churches.

After 900 there was a significant increase in the number of small local churches, operated by single resident priests or priests sent from minsters. These were known as 'field churches'. They acquired territories which they served, and came to be known as parishes. Some minsters became monasteries, losing their territories; some were shared between monks and laity, often with the monks using the chancel and the laity the nave.

The transformation of England into a land of many parishes took place between the 10th and 12th centuries. Larger towns had numerous churches by the C12th, founded by lords or guilds, or set up as chapels to commemorate saints. Anglo-Saxon churches had owners, kings or nobles who donated the land and paid for the building. In the C12th the Church sought more control, setting up owners as patrons and denying them rights over the property. Local church buildings were often a single cell to start with, but by the C11th they too were being built in 2 cells – chancel and nave.

In the C10-11th, services were in Latin, but the priest was urged to explain the gospel reading in English. Parishioners were urged to attend frequently, and Sunday was to be kept as holy from midday on Saturday to dawn on Monday. Festivals were kept as holidays. Guilds were established, groups of men who held meetings, organised feasts, subsidised one another in times of need. Gradually the Church required parishioners to pay dues to support their clergy – payments of grain, fees after burial, obligations for the upkeep of the building, a wax donation for candles and a ploughing donation after Easter. An annual payment, Peter's Pence, went to the Pope. By the 9th century all this coalesced into an annual tithe.

Christianity gradually colonised the landscape, with buildings at places of significance and the co-option of old shrines and springs. Little chapels sprang up everywhere – private or public, often on town gateways, bridges, roads. Crosses went up everywhere – roads, boundaries, market places.

2. The staff of the church

Most parishes were ruled by a single clergyman, either rector (absolute rule of cure of souls and benefice rights) or 'parson' (from Lat persona), meaning he was the person locally in charge. Some were given to clergy who did not have to be resident, and a separate benefice was created for a resident cleric, or 'vicar'. Many churches were run instead by chaplains, the patron/appropriator keeping the tithes and revenues.

Clergy training – ordination at 24+ years, after receiving minor orders (psalmist from age 7, acolyte from 14) and minor orders (subdeacon from 17, deacon from 19). Marriage was normal in the C11th, but forbidden from the C12th. In practice

those already married remained so. By the C13th married men could not be ordained. From the late C13th the priest's assistant was a clerk in minor orders, ie not fully ordained.

Clergy income came from land (glebe) which they could farm or rent out; offerings (3 or 4 times a year); tithes – amounting to 75%+ of the total, but varying year by year according to harvests. Also for gifts, hiring out ornaments for funerals, fees for seats and burials. Clergy were responsible to maintain the building and supply ornaments and books for services. Wardens were appointed from the C13th (proctor, reeve).

Clergy were often unpopular – poorly paid ones had no status, and for many they were authority figures with a right to take your money. Anticlericalism was widespread by the second half of the C14th.

3. The church building

Every new church had to be elaborately consecrated, with the bishop and others circling the building 3 times singing prayers, then inside sprinkling sand in the form of a cross linking the four corners of the church; then he wrote the alphabet in Greek on one diagonal and Roman on the other, using his staff, so the church was founded on the word of God. Then sprinkling of holy water, and crosses were painted in chrism (oil+balm) in 12 places. The altar was blessed and relics placed within it. These rites go back to Anglo-Saxon times.

The internal plan was Norman – chancel and nave. Chancel was holier because it was there that office and mass were held, and there were attempts to confine it to the clergy. Chancel arches were built from the C12th, and from the C13th screens were added to provide seclusion. The 4th Lateran council in 1215 ordered churches to reserve the sacrament.

Naves accommodated congregations and processions, held statues/paintings, and hosted tombs of patrons – and from the C14th of gentry and yeomen. By the C13 churches had bells; by the end of the century any had statues of the patron saint and Mary each side of the altar; the chancel screen had cross, Christ, Mary and John. Pressure was growing to admit the laity to the chancel, and this started with founding patrons and their families. Seating was provided in the nave from the C14th, with reserved places. It became customary for women to occupy the N side of the church and men the S side; this survives today in weddings, with the bride's supporters on the north side and the groom's on the left. Attempts were made to use the building for secular activities, but by the C15th many parishes acquired a separate building, the 'church house' for such events.

In the churchyard charnels were provided from the C13th to accommodate old bones when burial space was short – buildings at or below ground level, sometimes with a chapel on top.

4. The congregation

How many came to church? The largest attendance was Easter Sunday, required following compulsory Lenten confession from 1215; the confessant also made an offering. Easter Sunday communion was known as 'house'. Some parishes had up to 4000 people attending houseing, with numbers below a hundred in small parishes. Parishioners were required to attend on 5 or 6 major feasts and to make offerings; they were also expected to attend on Sundays and other festivals. For some, early services were preferable. Gentry would attend as a way of maintaining their social status and influence, and their town equivalents, wealthier merchants and craftsmen and their wives; for them too this affirmed their standing in the community. They served as church wardens, managed the guilds, claimed seating and burial rights.

Children made up about a third of the population. They attended from puberty (12 for girls, 14 for boys), but were not required to do so earlier. Churches housed schools from the C12, so there were educational benefits. For adults, there were guild groups from the C10th – specific groups of tradesmen or workers. There were also companies, for unmarried women, for young men, and for wives.

There were two issues about Sunday observance: attendance, and abstinence from work. Persistent offenders were penalised. There was a strong belief in keeping Sunday holy, but some preferred to stay in bed, to shop, eat and drink or play games, and some preferred to work. Compulsory attendance meant that behaviour of those so compelled was not always good; there were assaults and quarrels and unseemly behaviour. C15th worshippers in Yorkshire were required to stack their weapons in the porch; people were reprimanded for walking about during the service, disturbing others with chatter, arguing with one another and exhibiting their resentment in various ways. Discipline was exercised through visitations and church courts, penances and fines being issued and, if not complied with, excommunication. Continued defiance even after that could lead to secular arrest and imprisonment.

The provision of seating, common by the C15th, led to the need to stipulate when people should stand. The ancient practice of holding up your hands when praying was succeeded by an instruction to kneel and pray with hands together, perhaps based on the feudal practice whereby a vassal put his hands into his lord's hands as a sign of loyalty and service.

5. The day, the week and the year

A series of services to be said or sung each day by the clergy grew up; a large part of them consisted of singing the 150 Psalms, which took place across the whole of every week. Friday became a required day of fasting from meat, which was recommended also on Wednesday and Saturday. The wealthy might buy fish instead.

Services followed those of the cathedral of their province, but these were not always suitable for a parish context – lots of staff, lots of ceremony, and designed for a clerical audience. The services were led from books, with the daily services following an office – contained in a breviary. Churches also held a psalter, an antiphoner, a legendary (texts from the Bible, the Fathers and the Lives of the Saints) and an ordinal (guide to daily services). Missals and graduals contained the material for the mass, and a annual included pastoral services. All in all, parish clergy were required to provide 7 or 8 services each day. Office services were in Latin, sung with plainsong, and included psalms, canticles, antiphons, hymns, lessons or readings, responsories and prayers. In the C13th the Hours of the Virgin Mary were added to the Office. The Office was sung by the priest and clerk, sitting or kneeling at desks, and by the C13th, wearing surplices.

Then there were festivals and saints days – by the end of the MA, over 200 a year. Services were determined by daylight, with sundials (mass-clocks) from Anglo-Saxon times, and clocks from the end of the C13th, with the ringing of a bell. From the 1370s in London people began talking of time in clock hours, as we do today. These services kept the priest in church for most of the time from dawn to 10am, and then from 3 or 4pm for evensong. He had 5 hours in between to eat, hear confessions and do other business.

The most important service for the laity to attend was the mass – required on Sundays and festival days. But it was almost all in Latin, and by the C13th Church authorities were urging priests to instruct their people in English, though preaching was not soon even in the mid C16th.

6. The seasons and the year

The Christian life is a journey, and churchgoers in the MA travelled through seasons and observances each year. The first part began with Advent and followed the course of Christ's life on earth – nativity, Epiphany, temptation (Lent), Passion, resurrection (Easter), Ascension, Pentecost. The other part, 'ordinary time', ran from Midsummer to Advent and themes were more general.

From 1215 everyone was required to make confession at least once a year – usually associated with Lent. They were also required to receive communion at Easter.

7. The Life Cycle

Christian time also embraces the cycle of human life, and 6 events in particular. 4 were sacraments: baptism, confirmation, marriage, unction. The others were the purification/churching of women after childbirth, and the burial of the dead.

Children were often named after their principal godparent (so you might have two children with the same or similar names). Godparents go back to Anglo-Saxon times. Marriage was not universal – in the 1680s, 16% remained single. In the mid C16th the mean age was 29 for men and 26 for women. As many as 30% were remarriages of widow/ers.

8. The Reformation

By 1500 boys learned classical rather than medieval Latin at school, studying classical texts rather than medieval religious poems. The Latin of the liturgy began to seem inferior.

The first phase of the Reformation (1534) saw the King become supreme head of the Church, indulgences stopped, clergy were to provide a copy of the Bible in Latin and in English for anyone to consult (1536). In 1538 parishes were required to keep registers of baptisms, marriages and deaths. In 1547 Office services were required to include English OT or NT readings, and the epistle and gospel at mass. The requirement for clergy to preach 4 times a year was restated, and they were to read one of Cranmer's homilies each Sunday. Each church was told to acquire a chest for donations for the poor. In 1549 a new Prayer book was provided, requiring communion to be given in both kinds. From 1549 clergy were allowed to marry. In 1550 a musical edition of the Prayer Book was published, and the psalms were now read each month rather than each week. The 1552 Prayer Book revised the communion service, abolishing the altar. The marriage service did not change, with identical vows for groom and bride except that she made an additional promise to obey. Cranmer moved the wedding ring from the right hand to the left, and added the 'no man put asunder' declaration of the marriage from a German source.

9. Reflections

By 1300 England contained 9600 parish churches, and many more chapels.