

Exploring medieval liturgy in medieval churches

John Harper tells a story of evidence, imagination and realisation

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The landscape of Britain is still studied with late medieval churches and cathedrals, often restored or refashioned, but still used for worship by the few and visited in great numbers by the many. Neither worshipper nor visitor has much idea of the ritual practices that originally shaped the buildings, or of the experience of late medieval worship within the space. Back in 2011 there was an opportunity to encounter a series of late medieval Latin liturgies in two contrasting late medieval buildings: Salisbury Cathedral, and the tiny church of St Teilo in the National History Museum at St Fagans outside Cardiff. These formed the core of the AHRC/ESRC-funded research project, 'The Experience of Worship in late medieval Cathedral and Parish Church'. That research is proceeding and still bearing fruit, most recently in the two-volume edition of *Mass of the Blessed Virgin Mary according to the Use of Salisbury*, published in the British Acad-

emy's *Early English Church Music* series.

Undertaking re-enactments of historical events, even of past life-styles, has now become a familiar phenomenon at a variety of levels and with a diversity of intentions, including pastime, education and entertainment. Some of that activity is informed by significant investigation and serious research. What distinguished 'The Experience of Worship' project was the direct participation of the researchers themselves in the enactment of the medieval rituals. In addition to research informing performance, performance became an essential mode of research. Such engagement – like all other forms of historical enquiry – requires the use of imagination, recognition of restrictions and limitations, and – in the case of liturgical enactment – the compromises determined by the actualities of location and time. The late medieval buildings used for the enactment of these liturgies are busy places with their own timetables and



The relocated and recreated interior of the church of St Teilo, National History Museum, St Fagans.



Newly constructed Tudor organ by Goetze and Gwynn, painted by Fleur Kelly and Lois Raine. Photo: Adrian Holgeth.

demands. Furthermore, although Salisbury Cathedral retains its 13th-century profile, it has been subject to internal change over the centuries; and St Teilo's Church, having become derelict in the 1980s, has been moved over 50 miles east from a site just south of Pontarddulais to St Fagans Museum, and re-erected, furnished and decorated as it might have been in the early 16th century.

While the investigation was directed to historical understanding of medieval

worship in a medieval space, we were always clear that we were enacting rituals in the present: we did not pretend to be people in the late Middle Ages. Clergy, their assistants, singers, organ player, and those taking the part of the congregation were asking questions related to their own specific role in and experience of medieval liturgy, and reflecting on them in the context of the whole ritual. Repeating the same liturgies over each of three days at St Fagans enable us to revisit and refocus.

We are still unpacking the outcomes and taking forward new questions raised.




The intensity of the period of enactments between May and October 2011 was the culmination of 18 months of preparation and making. Apart from the administrative complexity, there was a Tudor organ to be commissioned and built; furniture and vestments researched and made; and a series of necessary artefacts either identified or constructed. We worked with more than 20 artists and craftspeople; for instance, no less than five of them were involved in making and decorating the Pax Board based on the survival at St Andrew's Church, Sandon, Essex. Archaeological remains, archival documentation and iconography informed the making of the organ, benches, stools, pyxes and cruets. Medieval brasses of priests provided details of vestments. Questions had to be addressed: discussion with Jeremy Glenn, who made the furniture, asked questions about seat height, posture and the physical processes of sitting and standing which extended into the enactments. Similar issues arose in practice regarding the constraints of clothing on movement and posture.

None of the makers was instructed to copy; working from a model or models where possible, and using traditional skills and materials, they were encouraged to be imaginative and creative. In some cases there were unexpected outcomes. Fleur Kelly, engaged to paint the organ case, immediately saw the opportunities afforded by two plain oak doors that protected the metal pipework when not in use. On the outside she envisaged two angels about to open the doors; and when opened, she imagined an Annunciation scene on the left, and a Nativity scene on the right. She raised additional funds herself to realise her concept, thereby creating an instrument that is visually as well as aurally striking – revealing images of the harmony between God and humankind expressed in the Incarnation, and sounds of divine harmony perceived in music by medieval thinkers.

Use of artefacts also led to new exploration. Two double-sided lecterns, one based on that at Ranworth with desks of different heights, encouraged us to gather singers round a single book. The ocular focus on a single text changed the dynamic of the singing group. Following on from that, a great lectern has now been made, large enough to hold a physically substantial book of chant, such as the



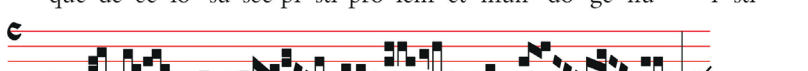
Alleluya*At the daily Mass in the Lady Chapel**Sunday Alleluya Vs. Obtine sacris*

A  L- le- lu- ya.

Versus  Ob-ti- ne sa- cris pre- ci-bus pi-a de-
 i ge- ni-trix ve-ni-am de-lic- to-rum
 tu- is sup-pli- ci- bus.

Monday Alleluya Vs. Per te dei genitrix

A  L- le- lu- ya.

Versus  Per te de-i ge-ni-trix no-bis est vi-ta per-di-ta da-ta
 que de ce-lo su-sce-pi-sti pro-lem et mun-do ge-nu- i-sti
 sal-va- to- rem.

Two Alleluya chants from Mass of the Blessed Virgin Mary *per annum*: a page from the British Academy's new *Early English Church Music* edition, with Hopyl typeface newly designed by Tim Symons, based on the 16th-century printed Gradual.



Newly constructed great lectern in use, with the 15th-century Ranworth Antiphonal.
Photo: Mark Cator.

15th-century Antiphonal at Ranworth Church, Norfolk, or one of the great polyphonic choirbooks from the early 16th century, such as those in the libraries of Caius College, Cambridge, Eton College, and Lambeth Palace.

Pragmatism and practicality had inevitably to be exercised. This was particularly true in the preparation of texts and ritual directions for both clergy and singers. Apart from limited time for rehearsal, there was no hope of achieving the accumulated memory, mores, habits and conventions that medieval clergy and singers took for granted in their recitation of 60 or more liturgies each week. Recitation and singing in Latin may have been attainable, but rubrics had to be adapted and in English. In the Mass, a medieval priest or singer was used to turning to at least three parts of the Missal or Gradual to find the necessary texts; these needed to be placed in sequence. Even so, the three clergy, the four assisting servers, and the singers all have their own ritual narrative to follow; and only the priest and the singers have constant access to a text. Furthermore, up to five different actions may be taking place simultaneously.

In all, three liturgies took place in Salisbury Cathedral, including a major procession around the cathedral and cloisters; and nine in St Teilo's Church at St Fagans. The audio-visual recordings provide a record not of polished performances but of a fluent working through of these rituals. The procession and two Masses were enacted in both buildings, and revealed

some of the challenges faced by local parish clergy, who lacked both the space and human resources of Salisbury Cathedral. The ritual of Salisbury (the so-called Use of Sarum) was used in over 7,000 churches by the end of the Middle Ages, all varying from the cathedral and from one another to a greater or lesser extent in configuration and resources. St Teilo's is about an eighth of the length of Salisbury Cathedral, yet the same texts and ritual directions were to be followed in both buildings. Where did the priest of St Teilo's go in procession in a church without the choir aisles and cloisters that are part of the directed route on great feast days? Where, on days when the Gospel was to be recited from the pulpitum above the choir screen, did the two clergy and three servers specified undertake this ritual when the only access to the top of the screen was a ladder – bearing in mind that they were processing formally, wearing vestments and carrying either book, candlestick or thurible? The texts recited and the chants sung may have been identical, but, notwithstanding the directions of the rubrics, the ritual had to be adapted.

Clergy, singers and the furniture, vestments and artefacts they required, formed one dimension of medieval worship at the east end of the church. The people formed the other dimension, unspecified in number, and largely unscripted, in the nave. Most of the participants in the enactments were either engaged in master's or higher degrees or were research-active staff, and most were practising Christians,



though from a variety of denominations, traditions and spiritualities. Freed from expectations to follow a book text or to participate actively, they found themselves alert to a richer mix of the sensory, emotional, spiritual and intellectual qualities of worship, including long periods of silence during the Canon of the Mass; to use images or memorised devotional text as a focus, and to be enveloped by the whole experience of worship, thereby discovering new means of participation. Certain moments of engagement proved especially significant, like the kissing of the Pax Board by each person present, often the nearest that medieval laity came to contact with the consecrated bread and wine of the priest's sacrifice. These were experiences of 21st-century individuals, but they have offered new insights on the artefacts, decorative elements, and devotional texts of late medieval religion.

The most recent outcome of 'The Experience of Worship' project, the new edition of *Mass of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, published in two volumes in the British Academy's *Early English Church Music* series, is in its way a distillation of both the underpinning traditional textual research and the more experimental prac-

tice-led research of the enactments.

The edition is distinct in two ways. Hitherto the *Early English Church Music* series has focused on polyphonic music. The two new additions inaugurate a sub-series of volumes publishing chant and monophony.

The edition also serves as a model of the operation of medieval liturgy by presenting the relevant elements of five distinct liturgical books – Gradual (for choir chant), Missal (for the priest), Customary (for ritual directions), Directory (to interpret the Calendar), and Ordinal (to specify the precise contents of each Mass according to day, season or feast) – in ways accessible to and usable by scholars, students and performers. What has often been assumed to be three seasonal forms of Mass of the Virgin Mary turns out to have in excess of 60 variant orders. They lie latent within the two volumes. The edition serves as a more permanent element of a project that has sought to bring a new level of understanding of late medieval cathedrals and churches – a remarkably prolific and important part of our medieval cultural heritage.

Further reading

The methods, processes and outcomes of 'The Experience of Worship' project can be explored further in *Late Medieval Liturgies Enacted*, edited by Sally Harper, P.S. Barnwell and Magnus Williamson (Farnham: Ashgate, 2016; reissued in paperback, 2019). A comprehensive website, including audio-visual recordings of the enactments and performance texts, can be found at experienceofworship.org.uk

Mass of the Blessed Virgin Mary According to the Use of Salisbury has been published by the British Academy in 2019 (*Early English Church Music*, Volumes 59–60). More information can be found via thebritishacademy.ac.uk/early-english-church-music

Salisbury Cathedral cloisters: procession before Mass as on a great festival, October 2011. Photo: Russell Sach.

