

LIFE IN A MEDIEVAL VILLAGE COMMUNITY

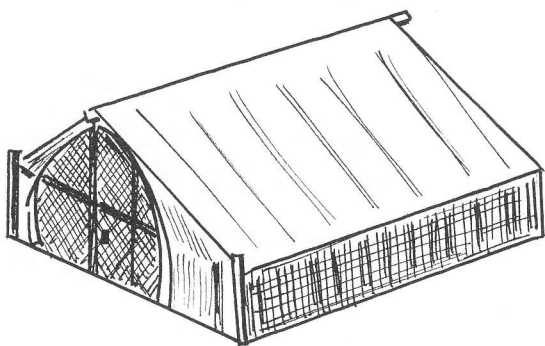
THE PARISH CHURCH AND COMMUNITY

The parish church was the centre of community life in the Middle Ages. The majority of people lived in villages and worked either on their own small farms or on the estates of aristocratic lords or bishops.

The church and the church grounds were used for meetings and celebrations as well as for the most important rituals that governed the life of the people – being baptised, perhaps being married and being buried in the church's consecrated ground. The church building itself was also a symbol of the promise of Heaven.

THE PEASANTS' LIVING CONDITIONS

The peasants usually lived in cramped, dark, wooden huts which had very little to offer in the way of comfort. These huts had no floors, just compacted dirt; they were without windows, cold in winter and hot in summer. By comparison, even the most humble parish church was a much finer and larger building, – a bit of heaven on earth.



A peasant's hut

THE CHURCH BUILDING

The church was usually built of stone, with a bell tower and a spacious interior. It was not just built as a place of prayer but as a place that glorified God. When the peasants entered the church they would be surrounded by the symbols of their faith and the promise of salvation.

If the parish was wealthy, the church might have stained glass windows which pictured people and events from the Bible.

Statues, carvings and paintings on the walls helped teach people the fundamental truths of their religion. Paintings or sculptures would depict the lives of saints who were important to the faithful and some paintings would remind them in the most dramatic way of the joys of heaven and the everlasting torments of hell.

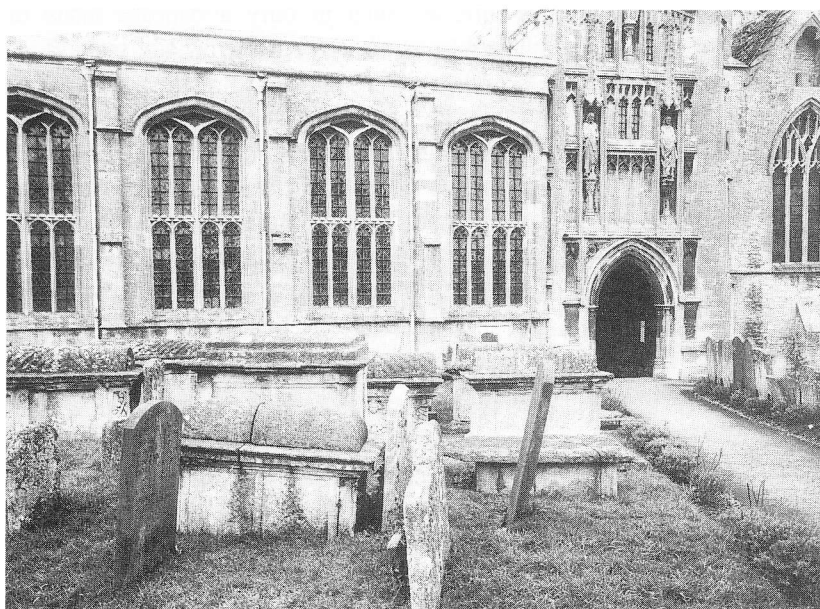
SUNDAYS AND HOLY DAYS

On Sundays and holy days everyone attended Mass. The sermons would encourage people to live a better life and would teach about the Scriptures and other sacred writings.

The local parish priest himself was not always a well educated person. Books were so expensive that a single book might cost a priest an entire year's stipend. (A stipend is the money paid for the upkeep of the priest.) So the priest relied on repeating well known biblical stories like Adam and Eve, Jonah and the Whale, David and Goliath, Daniel in the Lion's Den, as well as stories from the Gospels. He also reminded his parishioners of the ever-present temptations of Satan.



St. Mary the Virgin Church, Iffley, Oxford, England. A twelfth century Norman Romanesque parish church.



Graveyard in church grounds. Parish church, Burford, England.



Spire with carved gargoyles. The cathedral, Lausanne, Switzerland.

Why do you think these gargoyles were put there?

TRAVELLING PREACHERS

Occasionally the parish would be visited by travelling preachers who would teach the parishioners about particular aspects of their faith. More often, the sermons were about the torments of hell and the need to be vigilant against temptations, which surrounded a person all the time.

WARNINGS AGAINST THE TEMPTATIONS OF WITCHCRAFT

Medieval bishops' registers, (books which contained information about the happenings in their dioceses) give an extensive view of parish life and in particular of the religious concerns of the priests and



A baptismal font with a wooden cover which could be locked to protect the holy water from being stolen by witches. St Mary's church Iffley, Oxford.

parishioners. There are numerous references to warnings given to parishioners against indulging in witchcraft.

On the estate of Abbot Irmions, the Abbey of St Germain, near Paris in France, the registers show that the peasant farmers were known to say charms over their sick cattle and their sick children. They also recited incantations over their fields to ensure that they would give a good crop. It was an ancient, pre-Christian ritual to bury a cupcake made of different kinds of flour in a furrow and sing:

Earth, earth, earth!

Earth, our mother!

May the all-wielding, ever Lord grant the
Acres a-waxing, upwards and growing
Pregnant with corn and plenteous in strength;
Hosts of grain shafts and of glittering plants!
Of broad barley the blossoms,
And of white wheat ears waxing,
Of the whole land the harvest.¹

After singing the song, the peasants would then plough the fields.

The Church did not interfere with these old rituals but taught the peasants when they had been converted to Christianity to pray to God instead of Father Heaven and to the Blessed Virgin Mary instead of Mother Earth. (Peasants carried out these

Christian versions of the practices which were learned some generations before by their forefathers). This way the peasants would still say the spells of their ancestors but the incantations (spells) had been transformed into Christian prayers. A good example is a prayer for bees to swarm near a peasant's cottage:

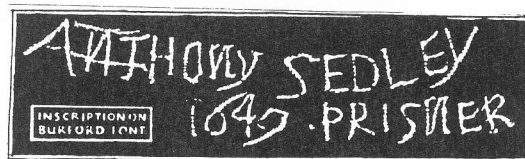
Christ, there is a swarm of bees outside.
Fly hither, my little ones
In West peace, in God's protection,
Come here safe and sound.
Sit down, sit down, bee,
St Mary commanded thee.
Thou shalt not have leave,
Thou shalt not fly to the wood.
Thou shalt not escape me,
Then ne'er go away from me.
Sit very still
Want God's will.²

Peasants were known to visit people who were thought to have magical powers even though the Church authorities would not permit it. Old parish registers recount that one of the questions which was always asked in Confession by the priest was "Have you consulted magicians and enchanterers? Have you made vows to trees and fountains? Have you drunk any magic potions?"

Not that going to Confession was a regular activity in the Middle Ages. Often the penances given were harsh, though certainly not as demanding as they had been in previous centuries, and people tried to leave going to confession till they were near death so as to avoid a harsh penance.

The Church recognised that peasants needed to be given special consideration because of the hard physical work they had to do and the poor quality and small amounts of food they ate. Often bishops' registers record the following advice to parish priests:

"You must not give them as many fasts to perform as rich men. Put upon them only half the penance."



Graffiti carved on the walls of a parish church in Burford, England. These are called 'Votive Graffiti'; the 'scratchings' in the stonework were blessed by a priest. Parishioners hoped these would bring success to some new enterprise – a mill, a house, a meadow.

A sickle, symbol of hope for a good crop.

A cap with ear-flaps, a soldier setting out on the Crusades.

A man dancing with a set of antlers on his head. This is an unusual graffiti; it could be a pagan dance from Wychwood Forest (near the church)

Burford church's most famous graffiti is one scratched into a lead plaque by a young soldier awaiting sentence of death for mutiny. He was reprieved; so Anthony Sedley is known by the locals more as a vandal than a hero.



A graveyard within the monastery chapel. Believers felt that if they were buried in a chapel or church (or even within the ruins of a church), they would be better protected from evil powers.

WARNINGS AGAINST SINFUL BEHAVIOUR

There were also numerous warnings against indulging in pastimes that could lead to sin. Diocesan councils complained about peasants (and sometimes, priests) singing wicked songs with a chorus of dancing women or about participating in “ballads and dancings and evil and wanton songs and such lures of the devil”.

Many of these songs and dances were forbidden by the bishops in every country in Europe. There was a legend that a group of dancers from a town called Kolbigk danced in the churchyard on Christmas Eve in spite of the warning of the priest and they were frozen to the spot for a whole year until the Bishop of Cologne released them.

It was common for parishioners to celebrate in the church grounds on holy days and usually the priest joined in the celebrations.

There is a story told about one priest in the English county of Worcestershire (pronounced

Woostershear) who was kept awake all night by the people dancing in his churchyard and singing a song with the refrain “Sweetheart, have pity”. The next morning at Mass instead of saying “Dominus Vobiscum” (the Mass was said in Latin in the Western Church until 1964, “Dominus Vobiscum” means “the Lord be with you”) he said “Sweetheart, have pity”. Apparently it caused quite a scandal and was reported in the diocesan chronicles.

THE PARISH PRIEST

By the Middle Ages, priests were not permitted to marry. In 1139, the Second Lateran Council decreed that priests were to be celibate.

The priest’s main duty was to care for his parishioners. He was expected to visit the sick and help the poorer people in his parish. If he was an educated man, which was not usually the case, he might teach some local boys Latin and Scripture.

There were no seminaries (places where priests are trained) – these were only established after the



A Holy man crushing a devil underfoot

What message was the painter wanting to convey?

Council of Trent (1545). Men who wanted to become priests presented themselves to the bishop and his councillors when they made their inspection visits to each district three days before the ceremony of Holy Orders was to take place. The candidates then took part in a three day oral examination (spoken test). If they showed that they understood the main teachings of the Church, they were accepted. Other qualifications for becoming a priest were: they had to be at least twenty-four years of age; not be illegitimate; not have any bodily defects; and not be the son of a slave.

Most parish priests were from poor peasant families. Few could read or write. As far as standard of living was concerned, many lived as simply and frugally as their parishioners. But for most priests, there was the assurance that the Church would protect them and, at least, basic food and shelter were available to them.

To support himself, a priest charged fees for baptisms, weddings and burials. In times of famine or crop failure not all the peasants could pay.

Priests were allocated some land to farm in the parish. Also, one tenth of everyone's produce was to go to the priest (this was called a tithe). But in practice, most of this would go to the bishop and for the benefit and upkeep of the church. One quarter of this income was kept in the parish for the poor, the sick and the elderly. If the parish was a country parish, the tithes were paid in crops and animals. If it was a town parish, the craftsmen, traders and shopkeepers would pay their tithes to the value of what they made and sold.