

Chantries, Obits and Altars

To medieval parishioners heaven and hell were not abstract ideas but reality, reinforced by the wall paintings which adorned most parish churches. Wealth and prestige were no safeguard against damnation: artists frequently delighted in showing merchants, kings, bishops, and even popes among the tormented souls in Hell.

Such a fate might be avoided through good works and adherence to Christian doctrine and ritual. But even so, the deceased might be condemned to centuries in Purgatory, where tainted souls were purged of their accumulated sins. Consequently, much medieval religious practice revolved around the idea of intercession. For those locked in Purgatory, masses or prayers offered on their behalf by priests or pious relatives could reduce their sentence – much as a petitioner in the living world might intercede before a judge, lord or ruler. In a debased form such beliefs led to trafficking in indulgences (respites of time in Purgatory), sold by dubious characters such as Chaucer's Pardoner.

Against this background, it was common for well-to-do parishioners to endow side altars, obits, and chantries. The 'obit' paid for a mass to be celebrated on the anniversary of a person's death, interceding for his soul. Chantry priests were paid to say regular (often daily) masses for the departed and their families over several years, and sometimes for ever; indeed some bequests financed construction of specially built altars or side chapels for this purpose, occasionally even providing a priest's house.

In Burford, as in most places, evidence for such practices takes many forms: bequests in wills, surviving brasses and inscriptions in the church, and physical



Figure A A 15th-century soul-weighing in South Leigh church, not far from Burford. The Virgin intercedes on behalf of the souls in St Michael's scales, while the mouth of Hell gapes open.

evidence of former chapels or altars. The primary motivation was undoubtedly religious, but social prestige played a part. Social precedence in church was as much a part of medieval life as religious ritual, and the wealthy townsmen who paid for new fittings or glass were deliberately displaying their wealth in the town's largest communal building, just as they did through their houses, furnishings, and dress.



Figure B Part of a damaged 15th-century inscription around Burford church's south transept window, exhorting people to 'pray for the souls of the father and mother of John Leggare of Burford, by whom this window is ornamented'. Presumably Leggare paid for the window's tracery or for its glass.



Figure C The south-east chapel was built and endowed by John Pinnock (died c. 1486), who in his will asked to be buried 'in the chapel of St Trinity, newly built at my own expense'. Pinnock left a further bequest for the chapel's upkeep, and 20d. to maintain a lighted taper in honour of the Virgin. The Pinnock family arms and a brass to an earlier John Pinnock were still in the chapel in 1574.

From the will of Richard Bishop of Burford (1508):

To be buried by my wyf before thymage of Our Lady in the burgeyssis chappel. To ... the said chapell where my wif lyeth 20s; to the Trynitie chapell in the same church 20s.; to Seynt Kateryne chapell beyng there 6s 8d ...

I will that all my hole londes and tenementes ... be sold ... And yerely while the same money shall or may dure and contynewe, the ... corporate body of the burgeys [burgesses] to finde an honest preeste to syng at the aulter where my wif lyethe ...

Provided alway that myne executours or burgeys doo kepe myne yerely obite to the valour of 20s. as long as my preeste shall or may continewe

Figure D Memorial brass to John (died 1437) and Alice Spicer, under the tower. The English inscription requests that the onlooker 'for charity ... pray for me to our Lord that sitteth on high, full of grace and of mercy.' The scrolls unrolling from their praying hands ask mercy from 'Mary mother maid', a common medieval invocation of the Virgin. The main inscription goes on to record the building of a new rood-loft at John's expense, 'With a lamp burning bright/To worship God both day and night'. John had also paid for a 'gabul wyndow' – possibly the existing west window, although that may be earlier in date.

