

The hidden history of Bristol St

Thomas the Martyr in the

fifteenth century



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Acknowledgments

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Images from the Hours of Isabel Ruddok are reproduced with thanks to the *Bristol Central Library*.

Authors Note

As there was no funding to pay for copyright to reproduce certain images, links have been inserted into the footnotes so that the online reader can follow these up at their leisure.

Opposite Image: St Thomas Vulgate Bible, Bristol Archives, P. St T/PM/1



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Introduction

St Thomas has always sat near the centre of the busy and vibrant port of Bristol. Its closeness to the quay meant that it was the parish of many Bristolian mercantile families who held great influence and power in the town. It lay south of the River Avon and shared the suburb with the church of St Mary Redcliffe and the church of the Holy Cross of Temple.

Bristol was run on a system of common office holding with a Mayor, two bailiffs and a sheriff, and later a Mayor and Aldermen. Men were elected to these offices by the commonality, many of whom were merchants. Peter Fleming has argued that Bristol was a town ruled by a merchant oligarchy.¹ Many merchants also became burgesses of the town. This meant that they had the freedom of the town and full rights of citizenship. It was also advantageous to their business prospects as it meant they could trade more freely through the port. The merchants had a big influence over the parish churches. They shaped the religious culture in the parish through their donations and bequests to the church during their lifetimes and in their last wills and testaments.

¹ P. Fleming, 'Telling Tales of Oligarchy in the Late Medieval Town', in M. Hicks (ed.), *Revolution and Consumption in Late Medieval England* (Woodbridge, 2001), pp. 177–93.

The history of the church of St Thomas the Martyr is tied to these people, their business ventures and the donations they gave to the church. Yet, the direct connection between the fifteenth-century parishioner and the twenty-first-century visitor has been lost due to the rebuilding of the main body of the church in c. 1790. What follows is an attempt to highlight the rich medieval history of the parish.

The medieval church, tower and bosses

When visiting St Thomas the Martyr in the twenty-first century, it is easy to forget that the church that stands on that site today is not the church that was always there. The church was first built in the twelfth century and dedicated to the then recently murdered Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Becket. Today, the only remaining part of the medieval church is the tower which was built in the fifteenth century.

The old church was demolished in c. 1790 before photographs had been invented, but there are some early modern drawings which survive. One of these comes from Millerd's Map which was drawn in 1673 and shows the surviving tower and a medieval nave.² Compared to St Thomas's sister church, St Mary Redcliffe, the building appears small and unimpressive. Redcliffe and St Thomas were sister churches

² A high resolution image of Millerd's map is available at <http://www.brh.org.uk/gallery/millerd.html>

that were subservient to the mother church of St John the Baptist in Bedminster. Redcliffe has always been a large and grand parish church, while St Thomas has always been regarded as the smaller, lesser chapel. In many of the wills of the late medieval parishioners, St Thomas is described as a chapel. However, it is also described as a church and a parish church by many other testators which suggests that although it was 'officially' a chapel, it was used and functioned as a normal parish church in the late medieval period. The difference in terminology is likely to be a lexical choice made by scribes who committed the testator's last will and testament into writing.

Other evidence also suggests that St Thomas had a decorative and impressive interior. In July 2017, four stone bosses from the medieval structure were returned to the care of *The Churches Conservation Trust* and the church of St Thomas. The first two are carved with foliage and are badly damaged. The third has two dragons circling and biting each other. They have little claws at the edges of the boss and small wings. The fourth depicts a ragged saint in foliage. This might be a depiction of St John the Baptist. Jon Cannon, an architectural historian, has suggested that these probably came from the vaulting of St Thomas. The church must have had high vaults which were strong enough to support such big and heavy bosses. He also noted that the undercutting is similar to bosses at St Mary Redcliffe. This may mean



Above: Images of three of the St Thomas roof bosses.

that the bosses come from the workshop of the enigmatic figure known as the ‘Bristol master mason’ in the early 14th century.

One can get a sense of the bosses in their original position in the church from a drawing of the interior that was done a few decades before the medieval church was demolished. This image comes from the Gough Manuscript for Somerset and was drawn in 1749.³ The image shows the inside of the nave with high vaulting and ornate decoration. Not everything in the image is medieval. For example, the organ and the pillars around the altar were post-1500 additions that were saved and moved into the new church building after the rebuilding. The masonry, stone arches and decorative bosses on the ceiling give an indication of the interior of the space within which medieval parishioners worshipped.

Like many medieval churches, St Thomas had several saints’ altars in addition to the main altar, called the high altar, at the east end of the church in the chancel. Wills show that there were altars to the Blessed Virgin Mary (probably in the Lady Chapel), to the Holy Cross and to St Nicholas. The 1543 churchwardens’ accounts show that there were

³ This image is available to view in the Bodleian Library, MS. Gough Somerset 8, fol. 9 recto

also altars of St James, the Blessed Trinity and St John the Baptist.⁴ These altars give an indication of the saints' cults that may have been venerated by the parishioners and demonstrate devotional focuses in the life of the parish more generally.

The accounts of the rebuilding of the church in c. 1790 also provide some glimpses of information about the medieval church. During the process of rebuilding, the commissioners of the rebuild kept accounts and notes from 1790 to 1825.⁵ There appears to have been a long running problem with one of the church's neighbours in the north east corner of the church. In 1792 the minutes note that the architect was instructed to take down the north east wall of the old church on which a house rested. This house belonged to someone called Mr Driver. The church attempted to purchase the house from him, but it clearly took a few years to purchase this from him as the issue arose several times in the following years. Mr Driver's house still stands today but no longer shares a wall with the church. Instead, there is now a walkway between the house and the church. This shows that the medieval church was wider than the rebuild.

⁴ Bristol Archives, P. St T/ChW/1

⁵ Bristol Archives, P/St.T/ChW/148

The rebuilding accounts also tell of medieval burial in the church. When digging the foundations for the new church, coffins were found. To deal with this, the architect instructed that an advert be put in the newspaper for families of the recently deceased to claim and relocate the bodies. A note in the accounts from Revd. Charles Samuel Taylor, vicar of St Thomas at the turn of the twentieth century, stated that there were vaults underneath the floor of the church. He observed that the vaults in the north isle were the most full, but there were hardly any burials in the south isle. It is not certain whether these vaults were still the resting place of the medieval parishioners of St Thomas, or whether their bodies had been removed from the vaults as they slipped from living memory to make room for new burials. However, two burial requests from the period under study suggest that parishioners were keen to be buried in the north of the church. In 1427, Robert Coville requested burial in the north of the nave and in 1440 Thomas Fische requested burial in the north porch of the church.⁶ This might suggest that parishioners continued to have a preference for burial in the north of the church. It is unknown where the St Nicholas altar was in the church. If we knew its location, this

⁶ The National Archives, PROB 11/3/134; Bristol Archives, JOr/1/1, ff. 173r-174r.

might tell us more about the seeming north/south divide to burial space within the nave.

Church artefacts: the Vulgate Bible

In around 1410, a new bible was made for St Thomas the Martyr.⁷ This bible was handwritten on vellum and contained the Old and New Testaments. It followed the Vulgate – a Latin version of the Bible translated by St Jerome in the fourth century. It became the official version of the Bible adopted by the Catholic Church in the sixteenth century – roughly 100 years after the St Thomas bible was made. However, the Vulgate was commonly used in churches throughout the later middle ages. To the present day the St Thomas Bible is highly significant because it has survived. It is one of only three complete English medieval Vulgate bibles in the country.

The Bible would have sat in the church of St Thomas the Martyr. At the end of the middle ages, it would probably have been used predominately by the clergy. After the Reformation, it is clear that it was restored several times as there are notes written into the bible in

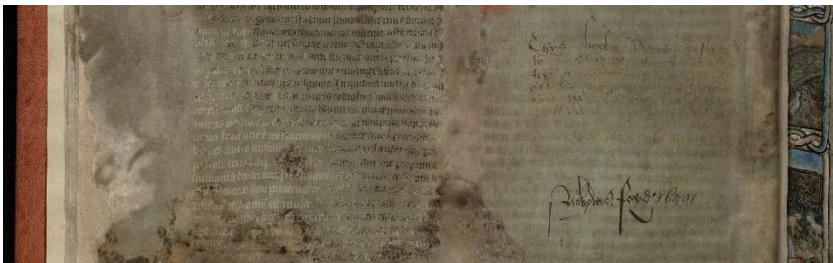
Opposite: A fish doodle in the St Thomas Vulgate Bible, Bristol Archives, P. St T/PM/1

⁷ Bristol Archives, P. St T/PM/1

lots of different hands such as,

‘Thys booke was Resotred to ye Chirche of St Thomas ye apostoll the xx of octobr 1567 at wyche time Mr Soudly and Thomas palmar made ther acontt’.

There are bits of graffiti on the main body of the text which suggest that the bible was not highly guarded. They are probably the work of a bored clerk or chaplain and are unlikely to be maliciously meant. The graffiti is rather innocent. Generally, at the tops of pages faces have been added into some letters and there is an example of a fish and a goose being added too (which are overleaf on the previous pages). It is likely that these faces were not part of the original design as they were done in an ink that dried in a lighter shade of black than the ink used for the writing of the main text.



Above: 1567 English Inscription, St Thomas Vulgate Bible, Bristol Archives, P. St T/PM/1

Opposite: A goose doodle in the St Thomas Vulgate Bible, Bristol Archives, P. St T/PM/1

The bible is very text heavy. It uses red and blue letters to highlight where books, chapters and verses begin and end, but there is little illustration. The little there is comes at the beginning of Genesis. Down the left hand side of the folio, it shows God looking down on the six stages of his creation (which are the images on the inside covers of this present booklet). The lack of illustration suggests, again, that this bible was intended for the use of the clergy who would have been able to read, and not the parishioners of St Thomas, many of whom would not have comprehended Latin.

Today, this bible is kept in the Bristol Archives. It was found at the bottom of the tower of St Thomas's after the Second World War. The base of the tower was flooded, as it sits below the water grid, and the bible was wrapped up and sitting in this water. It is badly damaged as a result of this and too fragile to be viewed at the Bristol Archives. Luckily, *The Churches Conservation Trust* and the *St Thomas Ecclesiastical Charity* funded conservation work for the bible which included a full digitisation of the work. This is available to view at the Bristol Archives.

Church artefact: Candlesticks

The church also boasts four thirteenth-century Limoges candlesticks. They were made in Limoges, an inland town in western France. It is likely that they were brought to Bristol through the port's trade links



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with Bordeaux and Bayonne in Gascony. They have copper bases and were originally gilt. This gilt is richly inlaid with enamel and decorated in bright colours, but they are not made of any precious metal. To visitors to St Thomas, they would have been a clear sign of the parish's wealth and the intense pious giving of the parishioners. They would have signalled that the parish, or one of the parishioners, had the purchasing power to buy an object from the continent. They are thought to be the oldest set of altar candlesticks in the country.

It is both curious and remarkable that they survived Henry VIII's Reformation and the Civil War. In the 1530s, precious metals on items belonging to churches were melted down and made into new vessels. During the Civil War, church silver was melted down to raise funds for the war. The answer, however, is simple. Although they were an item that shows the parish's continental purchasing power, the metal that made the candlesticks was not very valuable. Their value probably came from their status as a luxury item that may have been subject to an import duty, as well as the sentimental value attached to the donor.

Today, they are on display at Bristol City Museum.⁸

⁸ An image of the St Thomas candlesticks are not yet available on the Bristol Museum's online catalogue, but a similar candlestick survives at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O120845/candlestick-candlestick-unknown/>

Prominent families of St Thomas the Martyr

The Canynges Family

The name Canynges is most readily associated with St Mary Redcliffe, but the family were also parishioners of St Thomas the Martyr before the younger William Canynges (who is probably the best known family member) set up his chantries in Redcliffe and was buried there in 1474.

The Canynges men held a great deal of power in late medieval Bristol. The name first appears in Bristol the early fourteenth century, but the family first appear at the end of the fourteenth century with William Canynges the elder who died in 1396.⁹ He had married Agnes Stoke, daughter of John and Joan Stoke who were a wealthy mercantile family and parishioners of St Thomas the Martyr.¹⁰ The elder William had two sons, John and Simon Canynges.¹¹ John stayed in the parish of St Thomas the Martyr, while Simon moved to the parish of St Stephen across the River Avon. Simon married Margaret, daughter of William Botener and sister of John Botener. The Botoners were wealthy merchants in Coventry. John Botoner was a member of the Coventry

⁹ T. P Wadley, *Notes and Abstracts of Wills Contained in the Volume Entitled The Great Orphan Book and Book of Wills in the Council House at Bristol* (Bristol, 1886), pp. 48-49.

¹⁰ Wadley, *Notes and Abstracts*, pp. 5, 41.

¹¹ Bristol Archives, JOr/1/1, ff. 100v-102r; Bristol Archives, JOr/1/1, f. 120r.

Guild.¹² Simon's association with the Botoners would have given him connections in Coventry and access to the towns markets. The elder William Canynges also had connections with Coventry, as he and Agnes were also members of the Coventry guild.¹³ John was also buried in St Thomas the Martyr, but at least two of his six children can be traced to other parishes. One is the aforementioned William Canynges who was buried in St Mary Redcliffe.¹⁴ The other is Thomas Canynges who moved to London during his lifetime, where he served as Lord Mayor and was presumably buried there.

These men were merchants, mayors and generally very wealthy men. They were well connected and worked with their fellow burgesses in joint-business ventures. Their marriages to the daughters of other mercantile families demonstrated how they used kinship tied to secure business ventures and economic prosperity. But these men were also pious and understood the importance of setting themselves up for a good death.

Two generations of the Canynges family were parishioners of St Thomas and were buried within the church. In 1396, the older William

¹² M. D. Harris (ed.), *The Register of the Guild of the Holy Trinity, St. Mary, St. John the Baptist and St. Katherine of Coventry*, (London, 1935), p. 21.

¹³ Harris, *The Register of the Guild of Holy Trinity*, p. 88.

¹⁴ Bristol Archives, JOr/1/1, ff. 199v-201r.

Canynges made his will in which he requested to be buried in the chapel of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the church of St Thomas the Martyr, next to the tomb of John Stoke. In 1405, William's son John, also requested to be buried in his tomb in the chapel of the Blessed Virgin on the East side of the tomb or chapel. The Chapel of the Blessed Virgin was the most prestigious place to be buried within the church. The tombs of William Canynges and Agnes, and then John Canynges and Joan, signalled to the rest of the parishioners and visitors to the church that they were important, wealthy men and women.

William's request for burial next to the tomb of John Stoke is also important. Stoke was the father of William's wife, Agnes, and had requested to be buried in the chapel in 1381. Agnes's mother, Joan, was buried with John Stoke 1393. In his request for burial, William Canynges ensured that he was associated with his father-in-law from life into death. There is little record of the Canynges family before William Canynges the elder, so it may be that his marriage to Agnes nee Stoke had improved the family's fortunes.

John Canynges requested to be buried in his tomb in the chapel, on the east side. It is likely that the Chapel to the Blessed Virgin was at the east end of the church, to the side of the High Altar which was focal point of the mass in the parish. This is because it faced towards

Jerusalem and was a measure in preparation for the second coming of Christ. In this context, John Canynges's request becomes incredibly significant. By asking to be buried at the east side of the Lady Chapel, he was asking to be eternally entombed closest to the mass and the high altar within the Lady Chapel. In this position, he would have been the closest person to the chancel where mass was performed indefinitely.

Through their requests for burial, William and John Canynges were doing important things for the health of their eternal souls. They were both getting close to the holiness of the Lady Chapel, while remaining together as a family. Did this chapel become a small mausoleum for the Canynges family in the early fifteenth century? Probably not. Wills show that lots of other people were buried in the Chapel of the Blessed Virgin such as Simon Algoode in 1406, John and Alice Wodeley in 1407 and William Frome in 1413, who specified that he should also be buried 'on the right side of John Stooke'.¹⁵ Wills also show that there was more of an emphasis on being buried in front of the cross and on the northern side of the church after around 1410. However, the Canynges tombs were prominent and held in some esteem as William

¹⁵ The National Archives, PROB 11/2A/182; The National Archives, PROB 11/2A/199; The National Archives, PROB 11/2A/221; The National Archives, PROB 11/2A/439.

White left forty pence ‘to the altar next John Canynges altar’ in 1420.¹⁶ The altar was dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary, but it is clear that there was such a strong association with the Canynges family that a fellow parishioner saw it as the Canynges altar.

Other members of the Canynges family chose to be buried elsewhere in Bristol. Already mentioned is the younger William Canynges who was buried in Redcliffe, as well as Simon Canynges. Simon requested to be buried before the image of the Blessed Virgin in the chapel of St Katherine in St Stephen’s church in north Bristol. It is interesting that despite moving to a different parish church, he still demonstrated devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary by requesting burial near her like his father and brother.

The Caunterbury Family

An often overlooked family that may have been of importance in the church of St Thomas are the Caunterburys. Three generations request to be buried in the church throughout the fifteenth century. John Caunterbury is the first in 1411, then Nicholas Caunterbury in 1444 and then William Caunterbury in 1459.¹⁷ These men were fathers and sons. The direct line requested to be buried together inside the church of St

¹⁶ The National Archives, PROB 11/2B/305

¹⁷ The National Archives, PROB 11/2A/405; The National Archives, PROB 11/3/491; Bristol Archives, JOr/1/1, ff. 183v-185v.

Thomas. It is unclear whether there was a tomb or monument for this family, but being buried together may have created a focal point for the family's piety.

However, it appears that they were not always a happy family. Between 1443 and 1450, William Caunterbury challenged his late father's wife over bequests that Nicholas had made in his will.¹⁸ Nicholas left his wife Edith a broad black and silver girdle, a spice table, furniture from the hallway and jewels, some of which she had bought with her own money and others which her parents had given to her. He also left her his shops in Redcliffe Street and a tavern called 'le Redehalle' for the rest of her life. At her death, he wished it to go to his son William. The testamentary dispute was between William and Edith, his stepmother and Nicholas's widow. She appears to have given some of the items in the will to her sons from a different marriage. In this dispute, William was defending his inheritance from the claims of another family.

All three generations do their public duty to their parish church in their wills.¹⁹ They all leave money for tithes forgotten and John leaves money for the fabric of the church. Nicholas also gives a cloth of silver

¹⁸ The National Archives, C 1/13/40

¹⁹ J. Middleton-Stewart, *Inward Purity and Outward Splendour* (Woodbridge, 2001).

silk to be made into a vestment to cover an altar. This probably served the same function as his father's and son's bequests to tithes forgotten and to the fabric of the church. The altar cloth would have been a very public and physical demonstration of his piety, his wealth and his participation in parish life.

Each man was also concerned with his memory being preserved in the church. John Caunterbury left twenty shillings to be distributed amongst the poor on the day of his burial. The reasoning behind this was that the poor would pray for his soul's health after his death in exchange for his bequest, and that the prayers of the poor were most valuable to speeding the soul's passage through purgatory. Nicholas left a vestment for the vicar of St Thomas to remember him especially from the public on Sundays. One of the witnesses to his will was his confessor, Sir Thomas, who was also the chaplain in the Lady Chapel. Although it is not explicit in his will, he may have also hoped to be remembered in the prayers of that chaplain. William instructed that rents from his tenements in Redcliffe Street and Temple Street to be used to celebrate divine service for his soul, his wife Alice's soul and the souls of his parents after his wife's death.

The Ruddok family

Another family who appear to have been significant in the parish life of St Thomas is the Ruddoks.



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David Ruddok was a merchant, a burgess, the bailiff of Bristol in 1412, the sheriff in 1420 and a parishioner of St Thomas the Martyr. Peter Fleming has suggested that he was a Welsh migrant.²⁰ He was married to a woman called Isabel and they had several children. His will mentions three sons, John, William and Thomas, and a daughter called Isabel.²¹ Isabel's will mentions a second daughter called Agnes.²² He made his will in 1426. It was granted probate less than two months later in 1427 in the Great Orphan Court of Bristol and copied into its probate register. This court was designed to look after the interests of the children of the town's burgesses if their father died while they were underage. Therefore, the survival of David's will attests to his place in the leadership and elite of the town. It also indicated that he died young as all of his children appear to be underage in 1426. He left his body to be buried in St Thomas' which he describes as a 'chapel'. After this death, his wife Isabel remarried. Her second marriage was to John Clyve who was another prominent and powerful man in the town.²³

²⁰ P. Fleming, 'Identity and Belonging: Irish and Welsh in Fifteenth Century Bristol', in L. Clark (ed.), *The Fifteenth Century VII: Conflicts, Consequences and the Crown in the Late Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, 2007), pp. 175–93.

²¹ Bristol Archives, JOr/1/1, f. 155.

²² The National Archives, PROB 11/3/343.

²³ Bristol Archives, JOr/1/1, ff. 155v-158r.

In his will, he requests to be buried ‘in the chapel of St Thomas the Martyr’ and leaves one hundred shillings to the fabric of St Thomas and twenty shillings to the vicar for tithes forgotten. These requests demonstrate that, like most people, David was concerned with his soul’s health after death as each bequest was designed to speed up his soul’s journey through purgatory before he could hope to reach heaven. These bequests are ‘typical’ of the content of wills in the later middle ages, and so do not mark him out as being remarkable, unusual or prominent in the parish life of St Thomas. For other parishes in Bristol, historians have used churchwardens’ accounts to discern wealthy individual’s levels of engagement with the parish church. For St Thomas, surviving churchwardens’ accounts start from 1543 – over a century after the Ruddoks were alive. We can only speculate, but David may also have held the office of churchwarden at various times throughout his life in the church of St Thomas as a prominent man in the town who was part of common office holding.

The Ruddoks appear to have only been prominent in Bristolian society for only one generation. After the death of David’s wife, Isabel, they appear to disappear from the surviving records. There could be many reasons for this. Their children may have died young, lost their wealth and status, or moved away.

However, in 1479-1480, Bristol-born William Worcestre was visiting his home town and making a written record of topography. Worcestre is famous for his itinerates in which he noted down details from his travels across England and beyond. His descriptions of the streets and buildings of Bristol are generally plain. He was interested in the length of streets, measuring them in his own steps, and the composition of the town. But when describes the lanes running off Redcliffe Street, he notes the following:

‘...The fifth lane is on the other side of St Thomas's churchyard, where the tomb of David Ruddock is set in a certain wall. And it measures 180 steps.’²⁴

Worcestre wrote this fifty-five years after the death of David Ruddok and forty-five years after the death of his wife Isabel. If the Ruddok’s descendants had not survived or had moved away from the parish, this must have meant that the tomb was clear enough for Worcestre to be able to read David Ruddok’s name on the side of it. He includes it in his topography as a marker of sorts- a maker that was prominent enough for someone else to easily notice. Even though they were out of living memory by 1480, their tomb ensured that they remained a

²⁴F. Neale (ed.), *William Worcestre: The Topography of Medieval Bristol* (Bristol, 2000) p. 247.

part of the life and material culture of the parish and were being remembered by their fellow parishioners as well as passing strangers and people travelling through Bristol, such as Worcestre.

So why did David and Isabel both leave simple bequests to be buried in the chapel of St Thomas, when in reality they were both buried in a prominent tomb on the north side of the churchyard opposite the church? Perhaps David Ruddok had made arrangements for such a tomb before this death and so could leave a generic request for burial (which was part of the practice of will-making) knowing that his executors and wife would put his corpse in the tomb. Or maybe Isabel had the tomb made after David's death, choosing to make it distinctive as one day she would share it. Whatever the motivation, its prominence ensured that they continued to be part of the life of the parish church even after their deaths.

Isabel Ruddok's piety

David's will shows us a limited amount about his religious practices while he was a parishioner of the church of St Thomas the Martyr, but we know much more about Isabel's piety. This is because, in addition to the will, we also have a prayer book that survives for her.

Isabel was married to David until his death in 1426. They had four children at the time of his death. Eight years later, Isabel's will mentions a second daughter. As Isabel does not differentiate between the paternity of her children, it is reasonable to assume that the second daughter, Agnes, was also David's. Perhaps Isabel was pregnant when David died. After his death, she married again. Her second husband was called John Clyve of the parish of Holy Trinity in the centre of the town. He was the Mayor of Bristol in 1413 and 1425-26, and Bristol's tax collector from 1401 to 1404. He was related to the local aristocratic Berkeley family. He died in 1430 and requested burial in the parish church of Holy Trinity in the centre of Bristol, north of the River Avon.²⁵ Isabel then lived as a widow until her death in 1434.

An indispensable object when thinking about Isabel's religious devotion is her Book of Hours.²⁶ A Book of Hours, or Horae, is a prayer book. It is called a Book of Hours because it mirrored the eight canonical hours of the day. These were the hours of the day when people in religious roles or in religious orders would pray. The Book of

²⁵ Details of John Clyve's life are available at <http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1386-1421/member/clyve-john-1431>; Bristol Archives, JOr/1/1 ff. 151-158r

²⁶ Bristol Central Library, MS 14 Horae.

Hours was a way for a lay person to mimic this form of praying, so Books of Hours have different types of prayers in them.²⁷ Each individual set of prayers is called an Hour. The Hours of Isabel Ruddok survive in Bristol Central Library. Such an item would have been used for private prayer and devotion during services and outside of the setting of the church. It gives us an idea of the kind of daily devotional practices that Isabel was following.

Isabel's Hours were clearly made for her specifically. In his survey of *Medieval Manuscripts in British Libraries*, Ker estimated that Isabel's Hours were created around c. 1400.²⁸ Considering that she died in 1434 it is reasonable to suggest that these may have been made for her as a wedding gift which was a common practice. They were certainly made for her when she was married as the personal prayer, the Hour of Isabel Ruddok, uses her married name.

The book is small in size. Its measures 188mm by 128mm, making it a

Opposite: Illumination of the Angel coming to the Blessed Virgin Mary, Bristol Central Library, MS 14.

²⁷ 'A Book of Hours *Horae* c. 1420', <https://www.reading.ac.uk/web/files/special-collections/featurebookofhours.pdf> [Accessed 04.02.2018]

²⁸ N. R. Ker, *Medieval Manuscripts in British Libraries, volume 2* (Oxford, 1969), p. 210



portable object.²⁹ This means that there are lots of possible places where Isabel could have used this book to pray such as her home, church, chapels or while traveling to give only a few examples. In comparison with other late medieval Books of Hours, Isabel's book is certainly not the smallest a Book of Hours could be. There are some surviving examples of Hours that were small enough to be worn from the belt.³⁰ There are also larger examples that were used by the whole household.³¹ Isabel's hours are made out of vellum. Most of the text is in black, but blue, red and gold are used to rubricate certain words or dates throughout. The decoration around the borders on some of the pages is colourful foliage and there are three full page illuminations.

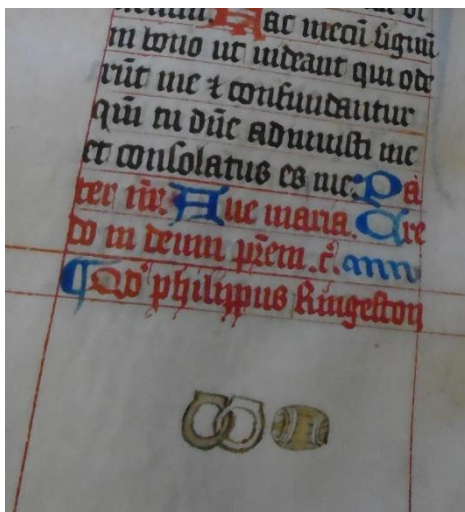
This was certainly a luxury item. It is a decent quality prayer book with illuminations and some gold leaf. Different qualities of Horae were available for purchase. There are examples of extremely high-quality books of Hours, such as those owned by royalty which are now held in the British Library, and examples of lower quality ones, such as that of

²⁹ Ker, *Medieval Manuscripts in British Libraries*, p. 210.

³⁰ M. Smith, *The Medieval Girdle Book*, (New Castle, 2017).

³¹ S. Rees Jones, & F. Riddy, 'Female domestic piety and the public sphere: the Bolton Hours of York', in A. Mudler-Bakke, & J. Wogan-Browne (ed.) *Women and the Christian Tradition* (Turnhout, 2006), p. 231

Philip Ringeston which is also held in Bristol Central Library.³² Her personal prayer demonstrates that this book was tailor made for her, as well as little female faces within the Hour to the Blessed Virgin Mary which may be a little drawing of her. By comparison, the Hours of Philip Ringeston have personalisation which was easily added after its initial creation. Folio 118v has his name at the bottom of the text and two rings and a barrel, a play on this name. Like Ringeston's, Isabel's book was handwritten, created before the printing press was invented. It was handwritten and the product of many hours of work. What does this tell us about her status? It confirms

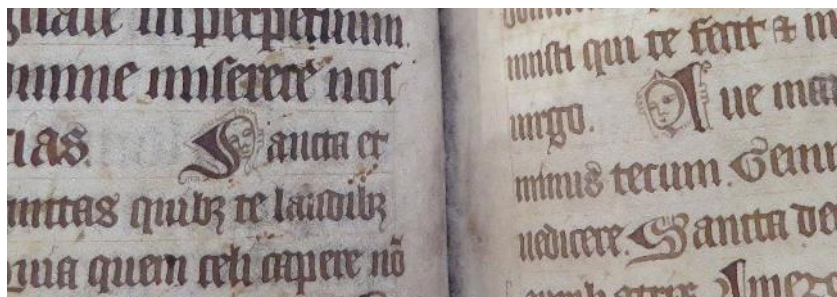


Above: Philip Ringeston's Hours, Bristol Central Library, MS 12 Horae, folio 118v.

³² British Library, Add MS 18850 'Book of Hours (the 'Bedford Hours'), the Bedford Hours were made in France and were thought to have been used by a member of the French Royal Family. They are in good condition and are decorated with expensive gold leaf and blue pigment (lapis lazuli); Bristol Central Library, MS 12 Horae.

what we might expect from the wife of a burgess and merchant who held civic offices in the town. The book is evidence of the luxuries that she was able to afford as a high status women in the town of Bristol. The book was a personalised item which she used to praise God.

The prayers in the Book of Hours are written in Latin, but would Isabel have understood it? Latin schooling was unusual for girls in the later middle ages and it was not expected for woman to be able to comprehend the language. However, some women were able to learn Latin from their prayer books.³³ The use of images was a way to communicate devotional ideas, and it is likely that women like Isabel would have known the meaning behind the prayers in the way that



Above: *Faces in the Hours of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Bristol Central Library MS 14, folios 19v-20r.*

³³ M. Clanchy, 'Images of Ladies with Prayer Books: What do they signify', in R. Swanson, (ed), *The Church and the Book: Studies in Church History* (2004), p. 110.

most of the medieval laity knew the purpose of an Ave Maria or Pater Noster.³⁴ If we consider the Book of Hours as a material object as well as a book containing text, we can understand that Isabel could have used the book as a focus for her prayers without having to understand the grammar and language that she was praying in.

How did she use her prayer book? There are some physical markers



Above: Illumination of the Blessed Trinity at the Beginning of the Penitential Psalms, Bristol Central Library, MS 14 Horae.

³⁴ R. S. Wieck, *Painted Prayers: The Book of Hours in medieval and Renaissance Art* (New York, 1997), p. 19.

that indicate how she might have done so. The image of the Blessed Trinity at the beginning of the Penitential Psalms looks smudged. It was common for women to kiss or cry over their prayer books, and so the smudge on the illumination is probably the result of tears or kisses.³⁵ When the book is opened, the pages open on the personal prayer, indicating that this part of the book was the most regularly used. It is unlikely that a subsequent owner would have used a prayer that was personalised with such a specific name, and so we can attribute this use to Isabel with some certainty. The personal prayer can also give us an idea of how she may have prayed. The prayer asks God to grant her victory over her ‘enemies and antagonists’. She calls herself God’s servant. At the bottom of the page there are the words ‘Christ helps, Christ redeems, Christ rules’. Between each phrase is a cross. This signals to the reader that they should cross themselves at these points and marks a climactic point in the prayer. We cannot know for certain if this is how she prayed, but it is likely there words crossed her lips.³⁶

Opposite: The Hour of Isabel Ruddok, Bristol Central Library, MS 14 Horae.

³⁵ C. W. Bynum, *Christian Materiality: an essay on religion in late medieval Europe* (New York, 2011), p. 65; M. Glasscoe, *English Medieval Mystics: Games of faith* (London & New York, 1993), pp. 277-278.

³⁶ Parts of Isabel’s Book of Hours has been transcribed and translated by Scott-Stokes, including her personal prayer. C. Scott-Stokes, *Women’s Books of Hours in Medieval England* (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 135-136.



Omnis deus opte pater filius et spiritus
 sanctus da michi Isabella Ruidok
 famule tue victoriam contra omnes
 inimicos meos et super inimicos meos ut non
 possint nocere mihi resistere nec contradicere et
 dicatur virtus eorum et consilium eorum in bonum
 vel in nichilum. tu deus spes fortitudo mea et
 refugium et meum et ceteris defensionis mee qui
 nus dissipantur et confundantur omnes adu-
 sarii mei sicut abraham deus ysaac deus iacob deus
 omnium bonorum munerum liberam me Isabella Ruidok
 ab omnibus periculis et angustiis de periculis et tribu-
 lationibus meis libera me et da in sermone meo
 virtutes bonorum sanantem in os meum ut plura sit
 omnia verba mea virtus et opera omnibus me intentibus
 et amantibus propheta clamat apud dicit
 dominus in se servantes saluat. episcopus



Isabel's Book of Hour shows devotion to the images of the wounded Christ, the Holy Trinity, the Virgin Mary and St Christopher, and the written prayers include devotion to the Holy Spirit, the Holy Cross, St Michael, St Peter, St Paul, St John the Baptist, St John the Evangelist, St Stephen, St Laurence and St Katherine. How did this relate to her parish church of St Thomas the Martyr? Often, the saints mentioned in a Book of Hours correspond to shrines, altars or images of saints in the owner's parish church.³⁷ Medieval wills and the 1543 church wardens accounts of St Thomas the Martyr show that there were altars to St Michael and St James, the Blessed Trinity, the Assumption, St Nicholas and St John the Baptist. Therefore, Isabel's Hours show some overlap with these, but the Horae also includes saints that were not venerated in her parish church. Perhaps this means that she was given the prayer book before she was a parishioner at St Thomas the Martyr.³⁸ If Peter Fleming's suggestion that David Ruddok was a Welsh migrant is correct, she may have come from Wales with her husband

³⁷ K. Kamerick, *Popular Piety and Art in the Late Middle Ages* (New York & Basingstoke, 2002), p. 190; R. S. Wieck, *Painted Prayers: The Book of Hours in Medieval and Renaissance Art* (New York, 1997), pp. 20, 22.

³⁸ Bristol Archives, P. St T/HM/ 32, The Story of a Bristol Church: St Thomas the Martyr MS unpublished book by R. W. Keen, pp. 3B, 12

and so the saints in her Book of Hours may reflect her mother church.³⁹

After Isabel, the book had other owners. Another fifteenth-century hand has written the name 'Johannes Somere de Stowe' on the third folio, showing subsequent ownership. After this, its history is unknown. Ker notes that it was given to the Bristol Museum by someone called Hart, presumably a book collector, in 1784.⁴⁰ Subsequent owners and three hundred unknown years of the manuscript's history leave many questions for the historian. It makes us unsure whether it was Isabel who left writing in the margins of the book, for example.

However, another document that can give us an indication of her piety is her last will and testament. As touched on above, the purpose of the last will and testament was to set the testator's earthly affairs in order, dispose of movable wealth and set up pious provision for the journey through purgatory that their soul was about to take. Wills were often written on the deathbed and did not always include everything that was being inherited. This was sometimes because arrangements had

³⁹ P. Fleming, 'Identity and Belonging: Irish and Welsh in Fifteenth Century Bristol', in L. Clark (ed.) *Conflicts, Consequences and the Crown in the Late Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, 2007), p. 186.

⁴⁰ Ker, *Medieval Manuscripts*, p. 210

been made prior to the making of the will. Isabel made her will on the last day of April in 1434, and it was accepted to probate on the 11th of May 1434.⁴¹ She must have died somewhere within those 11 days, indicating that what we are reading in her will are her final wishes from her deathbed. This means that we cannot reasonably expect the will to show us a lifetime of piety. The deathbed offered the testator a chance to reflect, so the will might refer to pious feelings held throughout her lifetime, or may show her wishes in her final days. Her will should also be regarded as a public document that reflects her duty to her deceased husbands too.

After leaving her soul to God, she requested burial in the ‘chapel’ of St Thomas the Martyr in Bristol, next to her late husband David. She left six shillings and eight pence to the vicar so that he might remember her in his prayers. She left the church a pair of vestments and a gilded chalice. She also left William Scragge, a chaplain, twenty shillings. This may be the same person who is referred to in the contemporary register of Bishop Bubwith. This recorded a William Cragge who was the chaplain of the St Nicholas Altar in the church of St Thomas the Martyr.⁴² Her son Thomas was made her sole executor and she

⁴¹ The National Archives, PROB 11/3/343

⁴² The Somerset Heritage Centre, D/D/breg/4, f. 188v-189r.

charged him with task of finding an honest chaplain to celebrate for her soul, David Ruddok's soul and the souls of their parents and benefactors in the church of St Thomas for the duration of a year.

Alongside bequests to the church and members of the clergy, she also left luxury items to her friends, kin and servants. She left Matilda Rarbour a blue furred gown and a black cloak. To her servant Joan she left a green furred gown. Her daughter Agnes received a standing cup with a cover, while her son Thomas received silver and red gilded belts described as being of 'peryswerk'. He also received a standing piece with gilded feet and covers. Her daughter Isabel was bequeathed a red gilded belt and her sons John and William both received standing cups with covers and a silver saltcellar. These bequests demonstrate the relationships she had with close family and kin at the time of her death, and items of value that she was concerned to pass on.

The will and the Book of Hours reflect different aspects of her religious devotion and represent two small pieces in a wider, unknowable jigsaw puzzle of her religious life and experience. The two pieces of evidence were made over thirty years apart, probably at different ends of her adult life. It is not surprising, then, that the focus of her devotion may have changed throughout her life. The two pieces of evidence show different sides of her piety – one public and the other private.

They serve different purposes, with the will including her public responsibility to her husbands.

There are vast gaps in our knowledge about Isabel's life and the parish life of St Thomas the Martyr. The lack of churchwardens' accounts for the church before 1543 mean that we cannot see which members of the laity were interacting with the church regularly. This means that we cannot know about her in the way we know about other lay women in Bristol such as Alice Chester of All Saints parish, for example.⁴³ The will and the prayer book, however, give us more of an insight into her life than is possible for most parishioners of St Thomas the Martyr. This makes her a woman of great historical value.

⁴³ C. Burgess, 'Late medieval Wills and Pious Convention: Testamentary Evidence Reconsidered', in M. Hicks (ed.), *Profit, Piety and the Professions* (Gloucester, 1990), pp. 14-33.

Heresy amongst the Parishioners of St Thomas the Martyr.

Introduction

In 2001, in her book on parish life in late medieval Somerset, Katherine French called Bristol a ‘hotbed of lollardy’.⁴⁴ French’s claim was not unprecedented, but followed a historiographical tradition that generally agreed that Bristol was a town where heterodox thought simmered and disseminated.⁴⁵ This general stance has been challenged by Clive Burgess who maintains that there was never a serious heretical threat in Bristol throughout the fifteenth century.⁴⁶

The heresy in question was called ‘lollardy’. Lollardy came from the ideas and writings of John Wyclif, a theologian at the University of Oxford in the late fourteenth century. He raised doubts about the doctrine of transubstantiation – the belief held by the Catholic Church

⁴⁴ K. L. French, *The People of the Parish: Community Life in a Late Medieval English Diocese* (Philadelphia, 2001).

⁴⁵ C. Kightly, *The Early Lollards: A Survey of Popular Activity in England 1382-1428* (University of York, Unpublished Doctoral Thesis 1975); J. A. F. Thomson, *The Later Lollards 1414-1520* (London, 1965); R. Rex, *The Lollards* (Basingstoke, 2002); A. Hudson, *The Premature Reformation* (Oxford, 1988).

⁴⁶ C. Burgess, ‘A Hotbed of Heresy? Fifteenth-Century Bristol and Lollards in Perspective’, in L. Clark (ed.), *The Fifteenth Century III: Authority and Subversion* (Woodbridge, 2003), pp. 43–62; C. Burgess, ‘A Repertory for Reinforcement: Configuring Civic Catholicism in Fifteenth-Century Bristol’, in L. Clark (ed.), *The Fifteenth Century V: Of Mice and Men: Image, Belief and Regulation in Late Medieval England* (Woodbridge, 2005), pp. 85–108.

that the bread and wine changed into the true body and blood of Christ during the Eucharist, warned against celebrating false idols such as images of saints or pilgrim shrines, advocated the translation of the Bible into English and questioned the sanctity of the clergy amongst many other beliefs. His ideas were supported by friends and followers at Oxford who preached about them around the country. He was posthumously declared a heretic by the Catholic Church. Lollardy continued throughout the country until the Reformation, but its emphasis and ideas differed between different dissenting groups in different times and places across the country.⁴⁷

The Oldcastle Revolt: National Narrative

One of the reasons that Bristol is regarded as a centre for heretical activity is because of the Oldcastle Revolt in 1414.

On the evening of 9th of January 1414, rebels from across the country gathered in St Giles's field which sat just outside of London. They were led by three men: Sir John Oldcastle (also known as Lord Cobham), John Acton and Walter Blake (sometimes known as William Blake or Walter Blakeford). They were inspired by lollard ideas. Their aim was to overthrow King Henry V and the Archbishop of Canterbury and unite

⁴⁷ J. P. Hornbeck, *What Is a Lollard?: Dissent and Belief in Late Medieval England* (Oxford, 2010).

both seats of power into one to effect a reformed version of Catholic Christianity.

On arriving in St Giles's field, the rebels were met by an armed force loyal to the king. The gates of the city of London were closed, so the support that Oldcastle and others had counted on from the capital did not come. Chaos ensued. Some were instantly killed by the armed force, others were arrested (including Walter Blake and John Acton) and some (including Oldcastle) escaped. Both immediately and over the next few months, the rebels were tried by the Kings Bench. Walter Blake and John Acton were executed. Oldcastle evaded capture until 1417, when he was found guilty and hung in a cage over a fire on St Giles' field.

But what does this have to do with the parish of St Thomas the Martyr in Bristol? The biggest group of rebels to arrive at St Giles's field were from the southern suburb of Bristol. And one of the leaders of the revolt, Walter Blake, was the chaplain of some of the parishioners of St Thomas the Martyr. He rode out of Bristol on the 4th January with a group of men to St Giles's Field.⁴⁸

⁴⁸Kightly, *The Early Lollards*, p. 242.

Blake was in the employ of the More family. The Mores were a wealthy mercantile family who were parishioners of St Thomas the Martyr. William More died in 1411 and left his will in the Great Orphan Book.⁴⁹ In this he leaves legacies to Walter Blake(ford) who is the same man who led the Bristolians to St Giles's Field. He also names one of his servants, James Merrshe, who went to St Giles's with Blake. After the Oldcastle Revolt, More's wife was tried with eight others by the Bishop of Bath and Wells for her association to the Oldcastle rebels. However, she was not tried with the rest of the men from Bristol, so her trial is recorded separately from theirs.⁵⁰ Christina was from a wealthy home and had enjoyed the perks of being part of a burgess family. It is significant that Bristol's early lollard group had the backing of one of Bristol's wealthy families.

After Oldcastle in the parish of St Thomas

Those who were associated with the rebels were initially imprisoned by the mayor and sheriff of Bristol. By 28th June 1414, John Souter, also known as John Corveser, remained in the King's prison in Bristol but

⁴⁹ Bristol Archives, JOr/1/1, f. 117

⁵⁰ T. Scott Holmes (ed.), *The Register of Nicholas Bubwith, Bishop of Bath & Wells, 1407-1424* (London, 1914).

Edmund Broun, Robert Wykeham, James Mostardemarker and Robert Harryes were released on the same day.⁵¹

At the beginning of July, Edmund, Robert, James and Robert appeared before the commissioner Master John Welles, the first official of the Bishop of Bath and Wells in the church of St Thomas the Martyr. During this appearance they were instructed to appear before the bishop the following day in the parish church of Banewell. Banewell is over 16 miles from the southern suburb of Bristol and the place of the Bishop's manor.

On 5th July 1414, Edmund, Robert, James and Robert were presented to the Bishop. They had to touch the holy gospels and swear an oath to tell the truth. They were interrogated on five things: the fourteen articles of the faith, the Ten Commandments, the seven sacraments of the Church, the seven works of mercy and the seven cardinal virtues.

The source that tells of this trial is a certificate that was returned to the King's Bench in London and also copied into the bishop's register. This certificate was copied in 1417 and so reflects a summary of past

⁵¹The Somerset Heritage Centre, D/D/breg/4 ff. 133r-134v; Scott Holmes (ed.), *The Register of Bishop Nicholas Bubwith*, pp. 283-290.

events. It is for this reason that we cannot know what questions they were asked within these broad topics.

The interrogation of Edmund Broun is the only account which is more detailed. He replied that he had been faithful as far as he understood. The register specifically records that he was questioned on the seven deadly sins. Edmund responded, ‘that they (the seven deadly sins) are to be avoided by him and all Christians without hesitation’.

The other three were then also interrogated before the Bishop. Other issues were raised during their trial in Banewell. They were accused of being part of a sect of lollardy in the neighbourhood where they lived in Bristol, and of having ‘books of lollardy’ which they read, enjoyed and listened to in public gatherings. What they mean by ‘books of lollardy’ is unclear. These could have been vernacular scriptures, prayer books or Wycliffite tracts.

After this, announcements and proclamations were made in the three parish churches in south Bristol: St Mary Redcliffe, St Thomas the Martyr and the Church of the Holy Cross of Temple. These urged anyone who had anything else to say against Edmund, Robert, James and Robert to come forward on the day of their purgation. Their purgation meant that they could not be proved to be lollards and so were ultimately found innocent.

In order to purge themselves, they had to find several honest and reputable men to attest to their innocence. They managed to find 14 such men to attest to their innocence. On 23rd of July they were set in front of Master John Welles in the church of St Thomas the Martyr. Through this purgation their good reputation was restored. Present at their purgation were the perpetual vicars of Bedminster and the Holy Cross of Temple, the Mayor, Thomas Norton, the Sheriff, John Newton and many others who were described as a great crowd.

Whether they were truly lollards who had gotten away with it, or were innocent people who had been caught up in the aftermath of the Oldcastle revolt, their purgation must have been a relief.⁵² They may have felt vindicated at the outcome of the trial.

The next year, on 6th February, John Ruell, John Jordan and John Colchester were freed from Bristol's prison into the hands of Master John Storthwayt, one of the bishop's commissioners.

They appeared before a tribunal in the parish church of St Thomas the Martyr in front of Master John Storthwayt. They also had to swear oaths on the Bible and were questioned. The records says that they

⁵² Anne Hudson suggests that this lollard group may have resisted questioning and used their relationship with the ruling elite of the town to get off the charges. A. Hudson, 'The Examination of Lollards', *Historical Research*, 46 (1973), pp. 147-148.

were questioned generally and specifically, but does not give any more detail than this. They were released on the condition that they would be imprisoned again if they continued to practice lollardy.

On 23rd of September 1415 they purged themselves in the parish of St Thomas the Martyr in the same way that the others had. This seems to be in stark contrast to the warning of which they were released from prison on as the purgation implies innocence. The record does not give enough details about the trial proceedings to be able to examine what happened between February and September to prove the innocence of these men.

Christina More was dealt with separately. The certificate for her purgation was sent separately to Kings Bench on 10th January 1418. It states that she made her purgation on 23rd July 1415 in the same way as the men.

After these trials, it is assumed that the defendants returned to their lives as before. There is no evidence about the More family after 1417. The Broun and Harrys families do not appear to have suffered in the long term from their association with heresy as there are mentions of both after 1417.⁵³

⁵³ Bristol Archives, JOr/1/1, ff. 131v-132v; Bristol Archives, JOr/1/1, f. 155.

Heresy at the end of the fifteenth century

Lay people continued to be tried on charges of heresy in south Bristol throughout the century, but the next instance of heresy in the parish of St Thomas the Martyr came in 1499. This is not to say that dissenting beliefs and behaviour stopped between 1417 and 1499, but that there is no surviving evidence of it being investigated by the ecclesiastical authorities.

On 23rd July 1499, William Hall, a botil maker, was examined for heresy on the grounds that he had taught and preached against pilgrimages, images and the veneration of saints. He was also accused of associating with other people suspected of heresy.⁵⁴ To purge himself for these crimes, he was to come to the church of St Thomas the Martyr in Bristol with seven others. It is unclear who these seven were. Hall was not found guilty, but the specific accusations made against him suggest he probably was involved in dissenting activity which could not be proved conclusively by the bishop's investigation.

Less than three months later, William Lewis was tried in the chapel of the bishop's palace of Wells on 3rd October 1499. He was accused of believing that the sacrament of the altar was not the body of Christ

⁵⁴ H. C. Maxwell-Lyte, *The Registers of Oliver King, Bishop of Bath and Wells, 1496-1503 and Hadrian de Castello, Bishop of Bath and Wells, 1503-1518* (Frome, 1939), p. 43.

but that it remained the material bread as it was before the consecration. He was found guilty. As a result, he had to abjure and perform a penance.

His penance for this was to walk before the procession going into the Cathedral Church of Wells with bare shins and a bare head in a shirt. He also had to carry a bundle of sticks over his shoulder. This was called a faggot and was a warning of the ultimate punishment for a relapsed heretic: burning. After the procession, he had to say the Lord's Prayer and the Angelic Salutation in the chancel of St Andrew's Cathedral and leave his bundle there. He had to repeat this act of penance on the next two Sundays, first in the parish church of St Mary Redcliffe, and then in the parish of St Thomas the Martyr. He was then confined to the parishes of Redcliffe, Bedminster and St Thomas and was not allowed to leave without a license.⁵⁵ This suggests that the bishop was concerned about his connections with heretics elsewhere and wanted to keep an eye on him. The record of his abjuration was written in English and is signed by William Lewis himself with a cross which indicates that he could not write his name.

There were other heresy trials in the suburb in 1499, suggesting that a lollard group had established itself in the neighbourhood. However,

⁵⁵ Maxwell-Lyte, *The Registers of Oliver Kings*, pp. 42-43.

beyond these two cases there is no further evidence of heresy amongst the parishioners of St Thomas in Bristolian sources. But, there is evidence of it in trials that took place in Coventry in the early sixteenth century.

Evidence for heresy in Coventry is more detailed than that for Bristol because the Litchfield Court book survives. This is a transcript of the court proceedings and contains details of each examination of the heretics, whereas the surviving records for Bristol are summaries of cases in the bishop's registers which skip the detailed examination. After a convocation of bishops in 1511, a large group were tried in Coventry on charges of heresy. From these proceedings, strong links with Bristolian dissenters came to light which give a different and illuminating view of Bristolian dissent.

The examination of John Johnson on 28th October 1511 revealed that he stayed in Redcliffe Street, in the parish of St Thomas, and conversed with Bouway. Bouway was a weaver from St Mary Redcliffe who was tried by the bishop of Bath and Wells. He confessed that they had talked against the sacrament of the altar, against offerings, images and pilgrimages.⁵⁶ At a later examination on 16th January 1512, Johnson

⁵⁶ Shannon McSheffrey, Norman P. Tanner, *Lollards of Coventry, 1486-1522* (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 109-113; Maxwell-Lyte, *The Register of Oliver King*, pp. 39-40, 52.

admitted that he knew of a man called Robert Qwyck of St Thomas's parish in Bristol who had been in conversations with Bouway senior.⁵⁷ Johnson was examined after Bouway senior had abjured, and he is careful to point that these conversations happened before the abjuration. After he had done his penance, he emphasised that Bouway had not conversed with these people again.

The examination of John Johnson demonstrates that there were lollards across the whole of the town of Bristol, and that they were not just confined to south Bristol as the bishop's registers imply. He names Henry Tuck, a wiredrawer, and Laurence Capper from Broadmead in the north east of the town, Henry Padwell from the eastern parish of St Philip and Charles Viller, a merchant, from St Nicholas's parish in the centre of the town. He notes that Robert Qwyck talked with all these people in private against the veneration of images, pilgrimages, and the sacrament of the altar. Particularly, they held that the sacrament was not the body of Christ but remained material bread. He also notes that a bottle maker named Thomas and John Nayer, both from the parish of St Thomas, were present at those conversations. These conversations did not happen in their homes. Instead, they happened while they were walking over the fields to St Vincent's chapel. In their

⁵⁷ McSheffrey, Tanner, *Lollards of Coventry*, pp. 225-226.

edition of the Coventry heresy trials, Shannon McSheffrey and Norman Tanner note that this chapel is unidentified but suggest that it may have been in Clifton, north west of the medieval town.⁵⁸ There is a cave in St Vincent's rock in the Avon Gorge. Today, it is accessible by a tunnel built in the early nineteenth century. It is generally thought to have been used as a chapel or sacred space across the centuries by locals. It is possible that this was the chapel that Johnson referred to as there is no documentary evidence of any other medieval chapel of St Vincent north of Bristol. Clay, however, lists the chapel in St Vincent's rock in his survey of hermitages and anchorites in medieval England which is likely to be the chapel that Johnson is referring to.⁵⁹

There are also examples of heretical books in Bristol from John Johnson's examination in January 1512 and the examination of Robert Hachet of Coventry in October 1511. Johnson mentions a man he knew in Bristol called Tuck who knew the Apocalypse by heart. This implies that he had access to an English copy of the Book of Revelation. Robert Hachet notes that a heretic called Thomas Clerc had his heretical books burnt in Bristol.

⁵⁸ McSheffrey, Tanner, and Royal Historical Society., pp. 225, fn. 137.

⁵⁹ R. H. Clay, *The Hermits and Anchorites of England* (London, 1914) pp. 44-45.

The Coventry trials show that the heresy that was found in the parish of St Thomas the Martyr was part of a wider heretical network in the town at the end of the fifteenth century.



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Conclusion

The above discussion has demonstrated that the parish of St Thomas the Martyr had a rich and diverse history throughout the fifteenth century. The church was a centre for mainstream practices of late medieval Catholic religion. It benefitted from the patronage and donations of local mercantile families, some of whom have left sufficient documentation to reconstruct some of their pious lives. As well as the Canynges family, the documentation and artefacts left by the Ruddok family give us an insight into the pious lives of some of the late medieval parishioners.

As well as these parishioners, the record also attests to a history of dissent within the parish. It is likely that there were different groups of dissenters throughout the fifteenth century who held different stances within a broad set of unorthodox beliefs. The evidence cannot give a conclusive answer as to the heretical status of the 1414 group tried for lollardy in the parish of St Thomas. It is open to interpretation as to whether they were lollards that managed to resist questioning and get off the charges, as Hudson argues, or whether they really were innocent people who were unfortunate to be associated with the Oldcastle rebels. It is amazing, though, that all the 1414 suspects were found innocent after the massive national upset caused by the Oldcastle Revolt. Nevertheless, it is interesting that ‘heresy’ and

proceedings against heretics continued throughout the fifteenth century and up until the Reformation when Latimer preached from the pulpit of St Thomas the Martyr.



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