

✠ Days and Rites ✠

Popular Customs of the Church



Mark Lewis

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Heart of Albion

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Mark Lewis

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by Terry Warburton

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albion@indigogroup.co.uk

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Chapter Four

The Commemorating Church

The Church has always placed commemoration and the blessing of good works at the heart of its worshipping life. The seasonal holy days remember essential moments in the life of Christ, and the Eucharist which is the most central act of worship, is in itself an act of commemoration and thanksgiving. We have seen in Chapter 1 that the celebration of the canonised saints was integral to the unfolding liturgical year, although only a few of these saints are ritually commemorated in the Church of England today. Special services of remembrance continue to be held for war heroes and others who have given their lives for their country or community. However, self-commemoration is also a very human desire and affluent parishioners of the past could take decisive steps to be remembered in perpetuity. By making bequests or endowments for special rites they were able to ensure a continual association with the gratitude, prayer and worshipping life of the Church.

In the fourteenth century, for example, it became customary for a wealthy testator to leave gifts of vestments, books and lights in his will as tangible ways to perpetuate his former life. For the wealthy however, the primary means of ensuring lasting memorial was through the establishment of a 'chantry' (French *chanter*, from Latin *cantare*, meaning 'to sing'). This was a fund established to pay for a priest to celebrate sung masses, generally for the soul of the deceased donor and frequently with the inclusion of alms for the poor. Chantry chapels were either built on private land or within the parish church, where a dedicated chantry priest would have been charged to perform these functions. Chantries were condemned and dissolved during the Reformation, but acts of self-commemoration continued to persist in other forms. Some were undoubtedly provided less from compassion than to

The commemorating church

give spiritual benefits to the donor. These legacies included annual sermons, parish doles of food, drink and money, or other charitable actions. There has always been a concern to try and honour the wishes of a dying person and to make sure that they are legally enforced so far as is socially acceptable (Thomas 1997: 602). As a result, an extraordinary range of local customs and public charities still persist, reminding us that there is always an enduring relationship between the living and the dead. Financial legacies to provide some measure of support for the poor were extremely common but many of these have faded away, either because the funds have dwindled or because the terms of a bequest are no longer relevant in the modern world.

Remembering the saints today

Most of the saints no longer have a national celebration, but are commemorated locally at patronal festivals, although all of the recognised saints are, at the very least, remembered in prayers of thanksgiving on their appointed days. The most celebrated saint in modern England is St George who is remembered on 23 April. In many parish churches, equestrian statues of St George were erected and solemn ceremonies held in his honour. At St Paul's Cathedral, London, the Order of St Michael and St George hold an annual service. Members wear traditional scarlet-tinted blue mantles at a ceremony to commemorate deceased members of the Order and to install new members. A similar service occurs in St George's Chapel, Windsor, which Edward III dedicated to the saint in 1348. On the Sunday nearest 23 April, scouts and guides throughout England parade through towns and attend a special St George's Day service at their local church. In recent years there have been attempts to recover the national importance of St George and bells are now rung in some parishes on 23 April while St George's flag is flown from the top of every English church tower. Similarly, St David, the sixth century patron saint of Wales is honoured on 1 March throughout England and Wales with special services and processions.

St Alban died at the hands of the Romans in 303 and is honoured as the first Christian martyr. His feast day is 22 June and his martyrdom was formerly celebrated at St Alban's Cathedral with a rose festival. In memory of a legendary incident in the saint's life, local school children gathered roses and carried them in procession to St Alban's shrine. Later, women made the flowers into a solid carpet which remained in the chapel throughout the week (Spicer 1954: 85). St Alban is now celebrated with a 'pilgrimage' from Roman Verulanium which re-enacts his last steps and ends with his execution outside the Cathedral. (see photographs overleaf). A similar celebration takes place at Ripon Cathedral which is dedicated to St Wilfrid, the seventh century bishop of Ripon. Every year on the Saturday before the first Monday in August, he is celebrated with a parade which is led by an

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Left and opposite: *The St Albans Pilgrimage, St Albans Cathedral, Hertfordshire. Photographs by Arun Kataria.*

actor playing the saint on horseback. The Dean meets the 'saint' at the west door of the cathedral where a service of thanksgiving takes place.

A saint who is widely honoured in the world of music is St Cecilia who is patron saint of musicians. Her feast day is 22 November and, since 1946 on the Wednesday nearest to this day, a festival service has been held in London. The service rotates between St Paul's Cathedral, Westminster Abbey and Westminster Cathedral. The music is sung by the combined choirs of the three churches and every year a new anthem is specially commissioned for the event. The service also features a spectacular robed procession by the City Livery Companies. St Blaise is uniquely celebrated on his feast day (3 February) at the Roman Catholic church of St Etheldreda in London because of his intercessory power to heal throat diseases. During the service two candles are consecrated, crossed and held over the heads or against the throats of the afflicted people being blessed. This ceremony is not performed in the Church of England although the feast day is observed in many parishes of the Anglican Communion but only as a commemoration.

The commemorating church



Many saints' days were characterised by open air entertainments and processions rather than acts of devotion. St Bartholomew's Day (24 August) still has an element of fun associated with it. At Sandwich, Kent, the day is celebrated with a special service in the chapel of the Hospital of St Bartholomew, followed by a race for local children who are given currant buns. Perhaps the custom originated in the twelfth century, when free food was distributed to the Canterbury pilgrims (Spicer 1954: 113). St Edmund, who was recently adopted as Patron Saint of Suffolk, is also celebrated with a bun dole on his feast day (20 November) at the local church in Southwold, Suffolk. Sticky buns are given to local primary school children in memory of the saints' martyrdom. Children also have a significant role in the commemoration of the sixth century Welsh hermit, St Nectan at Hartland, Devon, on 17 June. According to legend, on his arrival from Wales he was attacked by robbers and beheaded. The saint promptly picked up his head and continued on his journey, but wherever a drop of blood hit the ground a foxglove sprang up. Traditionally the event is commemorated with a special service followed by a procession in which children carry foxgloves.

The Thorn Cutting Ceremony, at St John the Baptist Church, Glastonbury, Somerset is a unique custom which has evolved from the story of a saint. The famous Glastonbury Thorn is a type of hawthorn that flowers at Christmas and is believed by some to have originated from the Middle East. Reputedly, St Joseph of Arimathea visited England nearly two thousand years ago and visited the Isle of Avalon, Glastonbury. He was carrying a staff which he

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thrust into the ground. This was believed to have taken root, eventually growing into a tree. The original tree was cut down by Cromwell's soldiers in the Civil War but trees found across the country are said to have been grown from cuttings, such as at Appleton, Cheshire. On the second Wednesday in December, a piece of the thorn is cut, then blessed at the altar and sent to the Queen.

Commemorative customs in the City of London

The City of London, with its love of pageantry and colourful ritual, has continued to maintain some intriguing commemorative church customs. Sir John Cass was an important benefactor in the East End of London and he is remembered as founder of the school to which gave his name. Sir John intended to leave all his property to the school but because of his poor health, he struggled to write his will. According to tradition, he managed to sign the document but suddenly suffered a fatal haemorrhage that stained the writing quill with his blood. On or near 20 February a commemorative service is held at the Church of St Botolph-without-Aldgate. The event commences with a procession of around thirty children from the Sir John Cass Primary school together with guests. The service includes performances by pupils from both the primary and secondary schools supported by the Sir John Cass Foundation. The children and staff all wear red feathers, which appear on the Cass coat of arms, as a token of homage to the school's founder. The day is sometimes known as 'Red Feather Day'.

Another act of remembrance involving a feather is the quaint ceremony of Changing John Stow's Quill, which is held annually at St Andrew's Undershaft annually, on or near 5 April. This little ritual remembers historian John Stow, who was a loyal member of the church congregation but best known for writing *The Survey of London* in 1598. The ceremony commences with a prominent historian addressing the congregation who then process to the Stow monument. He then removes the old quill and passes a new one to the Lord Mayor who then places it in Stow's hand.

Not all commemorative rituals have a positive meaning associated with them. The Knollys Rose Ceremony which takes place at All Hallows-by-the-Tower certainly has a penitential quality about it. A freshly-plucked rose is presented to the Lord Mayor at the Mansion House by the churchwardens. This is given in commemoration of Sir Robert Knollys who was fined in 1381 for building a footbridge between his two houses, across Seething Lane in the City of London without planning permission. The church stands on the site of one of Knolly's houses.

The commemorating church

*Changing John Stow's Quill,
St Andrew's Undershaft.
Photograph by Mike
Paterson of London
Histortians.*



Anniversary commemorations

Throughout the Church year there are many other imaginative and nostalgic acts of commemoration honouring famous people on the anniversary of their death. London churches observe memorial services to honour Charles I on 30 January, the anniversary of his execution in 1649. Special prayers are offered and a wreath-laying ceremony takes place at his statue outside the Banqueting Hall in London, which was the site of his beheading. Afterwards, a High Mass takes place inside the Banqueting House where relics of the Charles I are placed on the altar and venerated. Further commemorations of the King include a procession of choristers from St Martin-in-the-Fields to Trafalgar Square and a memorial service at St George's Chapel, Windsor Castle. Samuel Pepys the diarist is similarly commemorated at a service at St Olave's Church, Hart Street in London on or near 26 May and the Lord Mayor places a laurel wreath in front of his memorial. Katharine of Aragon, the first wife of Henry VIII, was buried at Peterborough Cathedral following her death in 1536; and is remembered during an annual festival in late January, which includes a special memorial service and a Roman Catholic Mass.

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A unique commemoration of a royal individual is the celebration at the Church of the Holy Cross, Avening, Gloucestershire, which is known locally as 'Pig-Face Day'. The feast commemorates Queen Matilda, wife of William the Conqueror, who consecrated the church in 1080. This is the only service to commemorate the commissioning of a church by a Queen of England. The Queen was spurned by a lover called Brittice and had him thrown into prison where he died. She was overcome with remorse and as an act of penance, commissioned a church to be built at Avening. When the church was completed the builders had a feast of boar's head. After evensong on every second year on the Sunday after Holy Cross Day (14 September), parishioners are served with sandwiches containing meat from a wild boar which is followed by fruit.

The most moving services are those given for people who have given great help to humanity. Florence Nightingale, known as the 'Lady of the Lamp', performed an extraordinary selfless duty to sick and wounded soldiers. She is commemorated annually at Westminster Abbey on a day nearest to her date of birth on 12 May. The nursing services and the ideals and standards she promoted are also celebrated. A lamp of traditional design is carried by nurses in procession from St George's Chapel to the Dean of Westminster who places it on the High Altar (Brentnall 1975: 180–1).

Humanity has also been served well by comedy, and the world of clowning is also celebrated at a unique memorial service which is held for the celebrated English clown Joseph Grimaldi, who died in 1837. This event takes place at Holy Trinity Church in Dalston, East London, every first Sunday in February. This has been an annual tradition since 1946 when a group of Christian clowns met informally. In 1967 the clowns were given permission to attend in their costumes. Hundreds of clowns flock to this event from all over the world in full attire, and the service is followed by a show for the children. A wreath is also laid on Grimaldi's memorial.

Remembering loss of life

The most poignant act of remembrance in the English calendar is Remembrance Sunday, held on the second Sunday in November, which is the Sunday nearest to 11 November, Armistice Day. This is the anniversary of the ending of the hostilities of the First World War at 11.00 a.m. in 1918. Paper poppies are sold in aid of ex-servicemen, because the common poppy grew in such abundance around the trenches of Flanders. The two-minute period of silence at 11.00 a.m. is maintained as a sign of respect for sixty million people who died in the war. The parade in London of serving soldiers and veterans is an event of national significance although most parish churches have their own services in which wreaths are placed at war memorials on village greens or in churchyards. Other Remembrance

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The Clown's Service, Holy Trinity Church, Dalston, London. Photograph by Doc Rowe. See also the frontispiece.

observances include the Dunkirk Veterans' Services although they have become less frequent as these ex-servicemen are now dwindling in numbers. A unique commemoration is the annual Cyclists Memorial Service which takes place on a Sunday in May on Meriden Green, in Warwickshire. This event has been held since 1921 in memory of cyclists who gave their lives in conflicts around the world.

Some of the great historical battles fought in defence of England are also remembered by the Church. For example, the Battle of Townton, one of the bloodiest conflicts in the War of the Roses which took place on Palm Sunday 1461 is annually re-enacted and remembered with a moving open-air service. The Battle of Tewkesbury of 1471 is also recalled with a re-enactment of the storming of the Abbey concluding with a service of Compline. The Battle of Trafalgar which saw a historic victory of the British Navy over the French and Spanish in 1805 is commemorated on 21 October; wreaths are laid at the tomb of Admiral Lord Nelson at St Paul's Cathedral and on board *HMS Victory* at Portsmouth. The historic signal 'England expects that every man will do his duty', is sent from the ship at 8 a.m. and a memorial service is held on board. The Battle of Nevilles' Cross in 1346 is commemorated annually on 29 May or the nearest Saturday from the top of Durham Cathedral tower (see Chapter 6).

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In a completely different vein, but no less significant is the annual outdoor service that takes place annually at Eyam in Derbyshire on the last Sunday in August, in memory of the many plague victims who died there in 1665. People had quickly become contaminated with the disease after handling infected cloth from London. The rector, Rev William Mompesson, attempted to seal off the village to halt the spread of the virus to the rest of the county. The local villages responded with kindness by leaving food on the boundary stones and coins were left in a water trough into which vinegar had been poured to sterilise them. Nowadays a procession forms at the church of St Lawrence and passes some of the surviving plague cottages on its way to Cucklet Dell, where the service takes place (Day 1999: 125). The tomb of Mompesson's wife, Catherine, who was buried next to her husband, is in the churchyard and every year it is decorated with a rose wreath on 'Plague Sunday' (Hole 1978: 235–6).

Individual memorial bequests

The determination for an individual to be remembered in perpetuity has provided a legacy of enduring bequests, charities and endowments in the literature of church lore. Food and drink doles were extremely common and many annuities provided for simple acts such the tolling of 'early rising' or curfew bells, the dressing of graves with flowers or planting trees in the churchyard. However, a substantial number of these legacies were blatant attempts to ensure that the communal memory of the deceased was renewed. For example, requests for candles and torches to be burned on the anniversary of a death were common up to the nineteenth century, but occasionally these could be taken to extremes. At Swaffham, Norfolk, for example, one Simon Blake appointed 'a lamp to burn by his grave on all holidays and Lord's days, from Matins to Compline, and the bellman of the town of Swaffham to take care of it' (Gasquet 1906: 119). Perhaps less demanding were the annual musical commemorations such as singing psalms or anthems. One of the best known in this tradition is that of William Hubbard, who in his will of 1774, left one guinea to establish the custom of singing hymns over his grave at St Mary-in-Arden church, Market Harborough, Leicestershire. This unbroken tradition still takes place every Easter Saturday at 6.00 p.m. even though the church is now in ruins. The custom of singing from the tower of St Magdelens College, Oxford is discussed in Chapter 6.

Henry Travice of Leigh, Greater Manchester, attempted to keep his memory alive by quieter means. He stipulated in his will of 1627 that forty people had to pass over his grave which is located under the floor of the church. In return for this curious request he left the sum of ten pounds to be divided by the local vicars amongst the parishes of Leigh, Atherton and Tyseley. The

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Singing at the grave of William Hubbard, St Mary-in-Arden, Market Harborough. Photograph by Brian Shuel.

ceremony still continues but the number of participants has diminished significantly in recent years and now only three people cross his grave after the Maundy Thursday evening service. William Glanville, however, went even further in ensuring his communal remembrance. Under the terms of his will of 1717, five poor boys under the age of sixteen who qualified for forty shillings each had to stand with their right hands resting on his tomb in Wotton churchyard near Dorking, Surrey. While holding this pose they were expected to recite the Lord's Prayer, the Apostle's Creed and the Ten Commandments. Furthermore they were expected to read aloud Chapter 15 of the first Letter of Corinthians and write two verses from the same passage in clear legible writing. This annual test took place in early February but bad weather often meant that it was rescheduled to a date near Ascension Day (Christian 1966: 94).

Possibly the loudest and most eccentric commemorative custom is the Firing of the Fenny Poppers, which takes place on St Martin's Day (11 November). This is the patronal festival of the church of St Martin, Fenny Stratford near Bletchley, Buckinghamshire. The Fenny Poppers are six tankard-shaped miniature cannon which are fired annually on 11 November in memory of Dr Thomas Willis, the founder of the science of neurology, who died on this date. He was the grandfather of a local eccentric, Browne Willis who built

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Left: *Charging the Fenny Poppers, St Martin's, Fenny Stratford, Buckinghamshire.*

Right: *Firing the Fenny Poppers.*

Photographs by Doc Rowe.

St Martin's Church in Fenny Stratford and he is believed to have started the custom in 1740. Each popper is ignited from a long poker heated in a brazier and traditionally the first is lit by the incumbent of St Martin's Church. The event originally took place in the churchyard but because of damage to buildings it has in recent years moved to a local sports field. The reason for introducing the miniature cannons is uncertain but clearly reflects the eccentricity of its founder (Legg 2001).

Financial bequests

The greatest benefits to a community were endowments providing some monetary support to the church or poor parishioners. Many of these legacies were humble pragmatic gifts of articles such as food, clothing, gloves or shoes for the poor of the parish. Others reflected the particular philanthropic obsessions of the benefactor and sometimes have a distinctly idiosyncratic flavour. Typical examples from the early nineteenth century include provision for keeping boys quiet in church at Wolverhampton, Staffordshire, taking care of the parson's horse at Yapham-cum-Meltonby, Yorkshire, while he was on duty, or the purchase of a parish cow at Bebington, Cheshire. Bell-ringing endowments were common, such as the tolling of a bell at Woodstock, Oxfordshire, to guide travellers at night or an 'early rising bell' at

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Huntingdon. Other widespread legacies were intended to encourage prayer and the development of religious knowledge, or promote marriage in the community.

Some bequests demonstrated remarkable audacity, such as the endowment at All Saints Church, Newmarket, Suffolk still surviving at the beginning of the nineteenth century which offered twenty pounds to a man if he married a young woman from the church on Maundy Thursday. If the money was not claimed in a given year, then it would by default go to a horse-racing fund! (Edwards 1842: 57, 68, 99–100, 201, 190, 221–2). The element of monetary distribution in many of these charities was often abandoned in later years because, as the interest accrued from the original bequest began to diminish, so the purchasing power of the money also decreased.

Certain bequests were intended to be fulfilled immediately on the death of the deceased. One Thomas Tuke of Wath, Yorkshire, who died in 1810, bequeathed a penny to every child who should be present at his funeral. As a result the churchyard walks were literally lined with up to seven hundred children and pennies were duly distributed to them. He also ordered forty dozen penny buns to be thrown from the church tower at noon every Christmas Day, leaving a sum of money for the purpose. For some years the buns were distributed in accordance with the will but eventually, owing to the disruptive behaviour that ensued, only six dozen were thrown from the tower and the remainder were quietly given away below (Vaux 1894: 139–40).

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Dicing for Bibles, All Saint's Church, St Ives, Cambridgeshire. Photograph by Fr Mark Amey .

A monetary dole still takes place annually at the Church of St Mary the Virgin at Hartfield in East Sussex on Good Friday, when money is given to the poor of the parish. The distribution originated in the seventeenth century when Nicholas Smith bequeathed a sum of money and the interest was to be used to fund the charity. According to local legend, Smith travelled around disguised as a beggar to see how he was treated; Hartfield was the only place which offered him a warm welcome so he elected to be buried there. Poor widows were the frequent recipients of monetary doles and one of the most famous distributions is the giving of the Widows' Sixpence at St Bartholomew the Great, London. In the past this was a charity dole of money and food given to widows of the parish of St Bartholomew the Great at Smithfield in London, but now hot cross buns are distributed to anyone who attends the morning service on Good Friday. The origins of the custom are lost, but Joshua Butterworth gave funds, and his name, to the event in the late nineteenth century. A similar charity still takes place at St Leonard's Church, Keevil in Wiltshire on the first or second Sunday Family service after Easter which resulted from the bequest of a local farmer, George Taylor in his will of 1852 to provide buns for local children.

Some testators could be very uncompromising about their intended recipients. William Underhill of Eldersfield, Herefordshire, left money in 1647 to the 'honest poor, not bastards nor any known dishonest poor'. The vicar called the names of the chosen, who received the money from the churchwarden while the latter was sitting on a chair at the head of Underhill's tomb. A least one charity generated sufficient funds to allow a weekly distribution, so at 4.00 p.m. every Saturday at Wiveton Church, Norfolk, the 'charity bell' was tolled and twelve elderly villagers received money as 'pensions' in a blue bag. This provision came from the will of Ralph Greenaway, a wealthy merchant, dated 1558 (Christian 1966: 15).

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*Inspecting Mary Gibsons Tomb, St Nicholas' Church, Sutton, Surrey.
Photograph by Brian Shuel.*

Some charities could be quite bold and self-indulgent. The so-called 'Pretty Maids' Charity' for instance, was instituted in 1841 by Rev Thomas Merrick, brother of the rector of Holsworthy, Devon. He left money to be invested in government stock, the interest to be given annually to the most worthy, quiet, handsome, single woman who was under thirty years of age and attended church regularly. The one chosen was concealed in Holsworthy parish church until noon, when she emerged from the tower door (Kightly 1986: 190–1). However, the most controversial church legacy must be that of Rev Dr Robert Wilde at All Saints Church, St Ives, Cambridgeshire. When he died in 1679, he made provision in his will for a bequest of money to provide a dozen bibles, six for the boys and six for girls, to be won annually by casting dice on the altar. Wilde was known for his zealous Puritan outlook and wished to demonstrate that God's word was in the bible and not in liturgical show and spectacle. The use of the altar for gambling purposes inevitably offended the sensibilities of parishioners although the dicing ceremony still takes place every Whit Tuesday since 1880 on a small table in the church (Roud 2006: 271).

Another curious and longstanding attempt to defy the ravages of time is the legacy of a wealthy widow named Mary Gibson who is interred at

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St Nicholas' Church, Sutton in Surrey. She died on 12 August 1793 and, under the terms of her will, a sermon was to be preached on the anniversary of her death – but with conditions attached. Gibson made a considerable bequest to Christ's Hospital School, but in return, the school's governors were required to carefully inspect the Gibson family vault beneath the church on the day, and ensure that any necessary repairs were carried out. A fear of being buried alive may have been at the heart of the original bequest, although it is unclear what those undertaking the inspection of the tomb in later years were expected to find. The churchwardens continued to undertake this duty, but the opening of the tomb has now been discontinued.

Bread doles and charities

Food charities and bequests have taken many forms including biscuits, currant buns, fish, meat, wheat, cakes and plum pudding, often in association with wine or ale. Bread has probably been the commonest item in charitable distributions. Christmas was a very popular season for food doles. For example, at Piddlehinton, Dorset, there was a festive distribution of mince pies, ale and bread to more than three hundred people and at Great Barr in Staffordshire, the rector gave to all comers on Christmas Day, as much bread, beef, vinegar and mustard as they could eat (Tate 1946: 114). Easter was also a popular time for food doles and a few also dared to ease the austerity of Lent. Some of these offerings have also been bound up with distributions of money. The dispensing of food as dole had mixed motives and provided a socially acceptable way for the wealthy classes to display their power and to reinforce class divisions within the community (Black 1981: 59). Some food doles, however, have been exceptionally generous. For example, the only daily distribution which still continues is at Cartmel Priory, Cumbria. Bread is stored at the church to be given to any poor person who may request it on any day of the week, in accordance with the will of Rowland Briggs of Swallowmire, who perished in the great storm of 1703 and left money for this purpose (Stockdale 1872: 164).

The bun distribution at St Bartholomew's Church, London, has already been mentioned but another similar charity dole also took place at St Michael's Church, Bristol. Large fruit buns called 'tuppenny starvers' were given out every Easter Tuesday at the church. The church has now closed, so the event is held privately at the local school where it has evolved into a Bun Festival. The origin of this custom dates back to the days when the poor could afford only black bread and this special occasion gave them the opportunity of receiving at least one meal of white bread every year.

Some doles could be regarded as tokenistic, yielding more to boisterous entertainment than feeding the poor. The St Briavel's Bread and Cheese Dole

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The Bread and Cheese Dole at St Mary's Church, St Briavel's, Herefordshire. Photograph by Doc Rowe.

seems to fall into this category. Every year on Whit Sunday at St Briavel's, Herefordshire, crowds of local people congregate outside St Mary's church in the hope of catching pieces of bread and cheese which are thrown into the air from overflowing baskets. This distribution dates back to the twelfth century when dole claimers could be anyone who paid a penny to the Earl of Hereford who was then Lord of the Forest of Dean. This entitled them to gather wood from nearby woodlands (Hartland 1893–4).

Another charitable bread and cheese dole takes place at Biddenden, Kent, at Eastertide which dates back to the twelfth century. Special hard and almost inedible biscuits in the shape of the Chulkhurst twins are given out. According to a local legend Eliza and Mary Chulkhurst were Siamese twins who died within hours of each other; they left twenty acres of land still known as the Bread and Cheese Lands to the church to support a charitable dole which continues today, although the original motives are not entirely clear. The bread and cheese goes to those in need but anyone who attends the ceremony may receive a biscuit (Hole 1978: 35–36).

By contrast, there is a remarkable graveside dole that takes place at St Mary-the-Virgin, Braughing, near Bishop's Stortford, Hertfordshire. It originates with the will of Matthew Wall, a sixteenth century farmer whose coffin was being carried from his home to the churchyard, when the bearers suddenly

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The Rector after blessing the Hallaton 'bottles' at the Butter Cross, Easter Monday 1999. The lady with the basket has just distributed 'penny loaves' (bread rolls). Photograph by Bob Trubshaw.

tripped on some dead leaves and dropped it. To the amazement of all present, he stepped out of the coffin, clearly revived by the sudden jolt. He died over twenty years later but in gratitude for being saved from a premature burial, he left a bequest for a small sum of money to be given to each of twenty children on 2 October. On this day, the church bells are still rung and the children sweep the route of the coffin to the church and prayers are said while Matthew Wall's grave is tended. Matthew lived to a good age and the day is locally known as 'Old Man's Day'.

Another legacy originally given in gratitude has resulted in one of the most high-spirited celebrations in England. This is the hare-pie scramble and bottle-kicking ceremony which takes place at St Michael and All Angels, Hallaton, Leicestershire on Easter Monday. A hare pie is paraded in a procession from the Fox Inn to the lych gate, where it is sliced, blessed by the Rector and 'distributed' to the local people – by flinging it in the air. About an hour later another procession is formed to where a bottle-kicking match commences between competing village teams. The 'bottles' are actually three painted wooden kegs, two of which contain beer. The custom seemingly began in 1770, when the Rector of Hallaton was given a piece of land, which according to local legend, was given in gratitude by two women

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*The Rector blessing the hare pie at the lych-gate, Hallaton on Easter Monday in 1999.
Photograph by Bob Trubshaw.*



who were saved after being chased by a bull! The original bequest required that two hare pies, two dozen loaves of bread and a quantity of ale be provided for the poor of the parish, which had to be scrambled for in public (Trubshaw 1990).

Cakes and ale doles

The distribution of Pax Cakes which takes place at Sellack at St Tysillio's Church, and St John the Baptist's church, Kings Caple (both in Herefordshire) is a dole with a very particular intention. It is a charity distribution and the round shortbread-like biscuits are given out by the vicar after the Sunday service on Palm Sunday. Each 'pax' (Latin for 'peace') cake is stamped with the image of the Paschal Lamb and offered with a blessing of 'Peace and good neighbourhood' which is spoken with each gift. The dole is believed to have originated with the 1570 bequest of a local landowner, Lady Scudamore, although there have been earlier attributions. Beer was originally part of the distribution and both the drink and cake were intended to be

Days and Rites



Above and opposite: *Orange and Lemons Service, St Clement Danes, Strand, London. Photographs by Doc Rowe.*

consumed within the church. The donor believed that any quarrels could be dispelled and peace and good friendship established over a communal meal before taking Easter communion a week later (Hole 1978: 233–4). The custom was also formerly observed at Hentland in the same county.

The giving of cakes and ale also feature in the Jankyn Smith Charity which takes place on the Thursday following Plough Monday at Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk. Jankyn Smith was a significant benefactor to the town of Bury St Edmunds in Suffolk; under the terms of his will, a requiem mass for his soul was to be held each year at St Mary's church on the anniversary of his death in 1481, followed by a provision of food and drink at the Guildhall. The charity still continues and residents of the almshouses which he also founded are given money. This is the oldest endowed charity in the country known to be still in existence.

Cakes also feature in the Methodist 'Love Feasts' which are modelled on the 'Agape' (from the Greek word meaning 'love') feasts of the early Church, where the wealthy brought food for the poor. The most notable love feast is held in a large barn at Alport Castle in Derbyshire on the first Sunday of July; unaccompanied hymns are sung and each participant takes fruitcake and water to share as a commemoration of Methodist fellowship. A similar feast has taken place under a gospel elm at Wicken in Northamptonshire.

The commemorating church



Only a few fruit doles have been recorded. The best known is the Oranges and Lemons Service for children at St Clement Danes, Strand, London in March. During the service, the 'oranges and lemons' rhyme is read and the fruit is distributed outside. This is believed to be a legacy of the days when barges bringing cargoes of citrus fruits from ships moored down-river were unloaded on the shore of the Thames just south of the church (Brentnall 1975: 171). Another orange distribution is made at St Mary's Church, Sileby, Leicestershire on a Sunday in May. The origin and meaning of this custom is uncertain but may relate to a commemoration of the victory at Waterloo in 1815 (Kightly 1986: 177). A distribution of apples takes place at Ripon Cathedral on Christmas Day – See Chapter 6.

Annual sermons

A popular form of individual endowment was in the form of a thematic annual sermon and numerous examples are found in parish records. The commemorative sermon is an essentially Protestant phenomenon for the purpose of providing an annual injection of spiritual instruction. Some of these are still honoured today. A notably survival is the 'Handy Sermon', preached at St Giles's, Oxford, on or about 10 March. This was founded under the terms of the 1622 will of William Handy who was presumably a zealous convert to the Reformed religion and wished his death to be commemorated with a sermon giving thanks to God for delivering the nation from 'Popery and Idolatry'.

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A good number of endowed sermons were also accompanied by bread and bun doles, which may have been intended to ensure a more substantial congregation (Kightly 1996: 204:). The character of these sermons has sometimes been penitential or instructive, on a topic of particular interest to the donor. Others can be a form of heartfelt gratitude for surviving warfare or a life-threatening experience. At Newark, Nottinghamshire, for example, Hercules Clay left a provision for an annual sermon in gratitude that he and his family were saved from a fire that destroyed their home. It takes place on or about 11 March. George Dalton was saved from drowning and in his will of 1556, he left a thanksgiving legacy for a 'Rush Sermon' to be preached St Giles Church, Farnborough, Kent, which still takes place on the first Sunday after 29 June. The theme is the 'frailty of life' and the church porch is strewn with rushes as a thanksgiving (Ashley 1988: 187). The Lion Sermon, preached annually on 16 October at St Katharine Cree church, in the City of London, commemorates the 'wonderful escape' of a former Lord Mayor of London, Sir John Gayer, from a lion which he met in the desert whilst travelling the wilds of Turkey. Gayer allegedly recalled the story of Daniel in the Lions' Den (Daniel 6: 16–24), fell on his knees and prayed for deliverance (Hole 1978: 180).

Endowed sermons are particularly common in the City of London and the Spital Sermon is probably the oldest annual sermon still to be observed there. It dates from the lengthy addresses on the Resurrection given from an open-air pulpit in the churchyard of the twelfth century Priory Church of St Mary Spital in the area that is now Spitalfields. On the second Wednesday after Easter, the Lord Mayor of London, the Court of Common Council and Court of Aldermen and city dignitaries from the Guildhall walk in procession to St Lawrence Jewry church where the sermon is now preached.

Another notable observance is the 'Bubble Sermon' given to members of the London Stationers' Company at St Martin's-within-Ludgate. The company process to the church on the first Tuesday in June where they are annually reminded that 'Life is but a bubble'. This was a bequest in the will of Richard Johnson, who was an eighteenth century benefactor to the company. The capture of Guy Fawkes was a favourite Protestant theme of commemoration in many churches and typically, on 5 November or the nearest Sunday, the 'Gunpowder Plot Sermon', is preached at St Mary-Le-Bow, London.

Sermons on human morals

There have been many legacies for sermons on various aspects of questionable human behaviour. Annual sermons on the sin of pride are preached at Salisbury Cathedral and at St Aldates, Oxford – where it is a

The commemorating church

challenge for many because it is preached in Latin! The 1706 will of Michael Solomon left money for a sermon against drunkenness which is occasionally preached at St Wulfram's Church, Grantham (Kightly 1986: 205). The ethical concerns of genetic engineering seem to have been anticipated in the 'Vegetable Sermon' preached at Whitsun in St Giles', Cripplegate, London. This sermon recalls the work of Thomas Fairchild who successfully created the first hybridised plant in 1720, but died worrying that he had been 'playing God'; he endowed a sermon to be preached on the supreme role of God in the creation of different species.

Some obsolete sermons are worthy of note because they reflect the particular concerns of their time. So for instance, until 1812 a sixteenth century annuity was still being paid for an annual sermon at Huntingdon to be preached against belief in witchcraft. At Berrow, Worcestershire, Susannah Cocks Nanfan left a sum of money in 1775 for a sermon against duelling, after her lover had been killed in a duel with her brother (Noake 1868: 32). This was still taking place annually towards the end of the nineteenth century. However, the concept of the annual sermon has continued and some preaching bequests are of quite recent origin. For example, in 1947 at Crawley, Sussex, a sum of money was left for an annual sermon to be preached on kindness to animals and in the 1950s, a St George's Day sermon was founded at St Peter's, Nottingham.

✠ Days and Rites ✠

Popular Customs of the Church

Mark Lewis

People go to church to worship and, as is often quipped, to be 'hatched, matched and dispatched'. Yet these quintessential rites have been adapted in all sorts of ways by parishioners and clergy up and down the country, while a great number of 'blessings' and other services that are quite specific to individual churches are performed annually. Collectively, they create a rich variety of traditions, many of which are only known about locally.

Some of these liturgical traditions have survived unbroken over many centuries, others have been revived after a break during the twentieth century - while yet more continue to be invented. Some of these more recent traditions - such as Harvest Festivals and Christingle - are now so ubiquitous that many churchgoers are unaware of a time when they were not part of the yearly cycle of customs.

By drawing together, for the first time, detailed information about these popular customs of the church, Mark Lewis hopes to stimulate further interest, research and recording of these remarkable events.



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