

St Michael at Plea

Dating the building of the church

The only direct references to building at St Michael at Plea is a bequest made by John Northalis in 1468 of 40/- for the releading and 'battelling' of the church (Blomefield IV, 325-6). This could be regarded as indicating the near completion of a substantial campaign of work, but it is slender evidence on its own. In these circumstances, apart from architectural style and fabric assessment (which walls are built up against or on top of which), a potential way forward is to examine who was buried in various parts of the building at what dates. The discussion that follows is based on two indirect approaches.

The first method is the premise that major benefactors or founders of chapels would be given preferential treatment. So, for example, the aforementioned John Northalis was buried in the vestry founding a chantry for 20 years, and leaving £20 for a cross of silver gilt (*ibid.*). The 18th-century antiquaries Kirkpatrick and Blomefield noted heraldry and merchants' marks on the south transept. The device of an 'alderman's gown' (Blomefield IV 321) was interpreted by Kirkpatrick as an alb, with the letters 'ry' written on it for Albry or Aubry (Ewing 1852, 218 and pl. x 3; Cozens Hardy and Kent 1938, 30-31). Dim ghosts of a tunic-like vestment can still just about be made out on one or two of the shields in quatrefoils at plinth level. Kirkpatrick



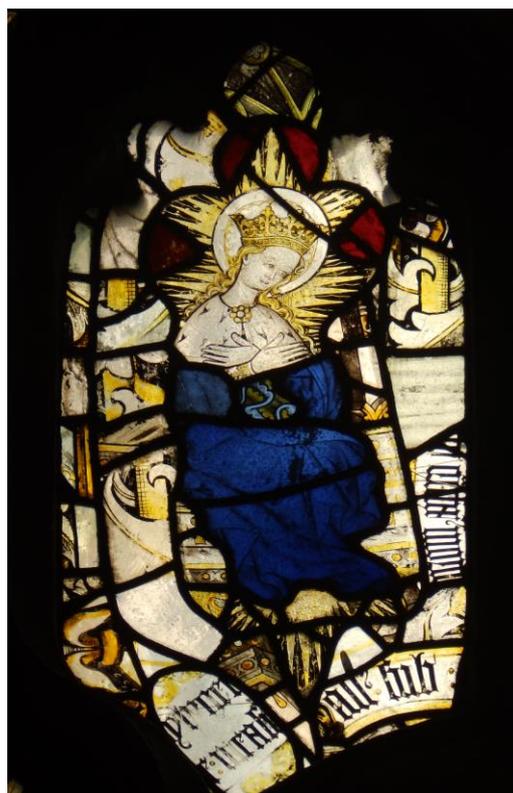
The south transept and south chancel chapel exterior:
the Lady chapel

also mentions the letter 'a' and a merchant mark (Ewing 1852, pl. x 2), but what is still visible today on the plinth, in lancets alternating with the quatrefoils, are letter 'J's'. As Kirkpatrick surmised this would indicate John Aubry, sheriff in 1460 and then thrice mayor, who died (in office) in 1486 and was buried in the chapel. Whether this was the transept proper or the south chancel chapel is not clear as the 'J's and shields are on both. It seems necessary, however, to distinguish between the two bays on the south side as their window tracery is entirely unlike, and each is independently roofed. In short, they do not look part of a single scheme of work.

In the eighteenth century this part of church contained 'two exceeding large stones ... entirely disrobed of their brasses' and it is likely that they marked the burial places of two separate benefactors (Blomefield IV, 320-21). One of them may have been Robert Machon, sheriff in

1450. In his will of 1460, Robert had asked to be interred 'before the altar of the Virgin in her chapel on the south side and left a Missal and suit of red vestments', perhaps his own work as he was a tailor by trade. As probate was not granted until 1467, he may have died some years after making his will. His wife Marion was 'buried by her husband's tomb' in 1475, and their son (another Robert) in 1498 (Ibid., 325-26). At least part of it clearly functioned as their family chapel, and presumably they had also helped to fund it. The earliest recorded burial in the north transept (of St John the Baptist) does not help refine the dating, it is that of John Ebbes, sheriff in 1484 who died the following year (Ibid., 326).

The second method involves the dating of paintings, which survive from the church in two mediums: on glass and panels. Medieval glass from the church is now collected in the east window but clearly comes from a number of different schemes. It seems probable that those which included the Annunciation, Coronation of the Virgin and the Holy Kindred (the Christ child and Mary with his cousins and their mothers) were originally in the Lady chapel. In 1850, Charles Winston recorded painted glass in the south window of the south aisle chapel (BL MS Add. 33848, iii, f.6 r and v), and it would make sense if some of this had Marian subject matter. The figure of Mary from her Coronation has been dated 'mid-15th-c' (King 2015, now in C2) whereas the Annunciate Virgin is assigned to the period c.1460-c.1480 (ibid., in C4). A date c.1460 would fit quite well with the evidence from the burials discussed above. Other extant fragments include a Resurrected Christ, arguably from a *Noli me tangere*, also attributed to the mid-15th century (ibid., in C1). It too serves as confirmation that glazing was in progress in the church by around 1460. This fits well with the style of some of the painted panels from St Michael's now in the cathedral (see separate study).



The figure of Mary from a Coronation of the Virgin, c.1460, now in the east

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