THE ANCIENT OFFICE OF PARISH CLERK AND THE PARISH CLERKS COMPANY OF LONDON

OSWALD CLARK

Parish Clerk of St Andrew by the Wardrobe in the City of London[1]

Attempt is made to trace the work and role of the parish clerk from menial monastic beginnings to its emergence in the thirteenth century as a canonically recognised office – probably the oldest unordained office at the parochial level in the English church and the last vestigial survival of Minor Orders. In parallel is developed the story of the coming together of London parish clerks as a guild or fraternity, radically distinguished from the merchant, craft and service guilds, and of the grant to that fraternity of 'clerici et litterati' *– with its unique livery and ethos – of the first of its six Royal Charters. The duties and activities of mediaeval parish clerks and the constitution of their Company are considered along with its possessions, especially its Bede Roll. Attention is paid to the understanding of Purgatory and the devastating effects of the Chantries Act 1548. The parish clerk's changing role following the Reformation is examined within the prevailing continuities and discontinuities. New duties in relation to Registration and Bills of Mortality are marked in addition to the parish clerk's increasing social involvement in the civil affairs of the parish. The decline in the parish clerk's duties from the nineteenth century is studied and its effect on the office, the London Company and the ancient parishes of old London, from which the Company is exclusively recruited.*

It is almost exactly a hundred years since PH Ditchfield observed with unconcealed nostalgia that 'the race of parish clerks is gradually becoming extinct'.[2] Sadly, this prediction has proved true for the generality of Church of England parishes. There remain, however, a few isolated pockets and some areas where this once highly important office is still resolutely maintained. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Square Mile of the City of London, in the City's earliest 'suburbs' of Westminster and Southwark, along the riverside in Stepney, Lambeth and Bermondsey and in a handful of outpost London 'villages' such as Hackney, Islington and Rotherhithe. It is with the story of the parish clerk, particularly in those 150 ancient ecclesiastical parishes, that this article is concerned.

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[1] An edited version of a paper delivered on 10 November 2004 as a contribution to the 2004 series of London Lectures of the Ecclesiastical Law Society. An earlier and much shorter version of this paper was given on 9 July 2003 to the Annual General Meeting of the Friends of the City Churches.

[2] PH Ditchfield, *The Parish Clerk* (Methuen & Co 1907).

The story is a long one.[3] It is a story of candles and canticles, rather than courts and cases, of little parishes, rather than legal principles. For the parish clerk the letters N D stand for *Nunc Dimittis* – not *Novel Disseisin* or 'New Directions'. His concern is less with *Obiters* than with *Obits*.

The story begins back in the early days of the Gregorian Mission to this country. Augustine was its leader 'on the ground' and there is no doubting his courage and his diligence. Equally, there is no doubt that it was Pope Gregory the Great who masterminded and sustained the whole enterprise. Not for nothing does the Venerable Bede accord to Gregory the title of 'Apostle to the English'.[4] So it was to Gregory to whom the cautious Augustine addressed his queries, to one of which Gregory replied:

> If there are any Clerics who have not received Sacred Orders and who cannot accept a life of continence, let them marry and receive their stipends outside the common fund.[5]

Here is very strong indication that Augustine's company of forty *clerici* included some who were not ordained celibate priests and who were either laymen or in office within the inferior degrees of ministry, the so called Minor Orders, ranging from *ostiarius* to sub-deacon and requiring neither celibacy nor the acceptance of full and final vows. Indeed, it has been suggested that, apart from Laurence (who later (604-609?) succeeded Augustine at Canterbury), Augustine had no other colleague in priest's orders.[6] Nor is this surprising for from their earliest days monastic communities recognised the place and usefulness of the layman. Certainly, as it emerged in this country from about the eighth century, the Benedictine Rule fully acknowledged the lay role; there is no evidence that St Benedict himself was ever ordained as a priest.

In any event, priestly ordained monks were trained for a community life and needed practical, basic, menial support. The chapel had to be cleaned, lit and if possible heated; the altar had to be dressed and furnished; bread, wine, fresh water, incense had to be procured; vestments had to be prepared and mended; the celebrant always needed a server not only to assist him but to make the responses which the ordered liturgy required.

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[3] No one – and certainly no one who like the present writer is neither lawyer, liturgist, theologian nor historian – can presume to contribute on this topic without acknowledging from the outset an overwhelming debt of gratitude to RH Adams, *The Parish Clerks of London* (Phillimore 1971). Adams, friend and mentor to so many clerks, cites helpfully a number of the earlier authorities, especially J Christie, *Some Account of Parish Clerk,* (privately printed 1893) and EA Ebblewhite, *The Parish Clerks' Company and its Charters* (privately printed 1932).

[4] Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Penguin rev edn 1990), p 98. See also M Deanesly, *The Pre-Conquest Church in England* (A & C Black 1961). The English Church conceived of itself as the child of Pope Gregory I (Deanesly op cit p 224).

[5] Bede op cit p 78.

[6] Deanesly op cit p 50.

It was within that monastic setting of worship and service that the primary functions of the non-priestly ordained, non-celibate clerk – to serve at Mass, to lead the responses, to sing the psalms and to help practically in the chapel – first took formal shape within the English Church.

Other functions were added in later centuries – to read the liturgical Epistle,[7] to bear the holy water and the *aspergillum*, to lead the congregation, to help the parish school and so on, but the essential work of the Pre-Reformation parish clerk – as he came later to be known – was born within the *familia* of the forty *clerici* of St Augustine. And from the days of St Augustine the parish clerk's job – and later his office – have never wholly ceased to exist within the Church of England – unlike those of the parish priest himself, who has not infrequently been subject to ejection, intrusion and deprivation.

That was the pattern that was translated in turbulent Anglo-Saxon days to the life of the large minster churches, monastic and secular. The Greek Archbishop Theodore (c 602-690) may not have founded the parochial system in England. What he appears to have done is to subdivide large areas and assign specific pastoral charges in a way that prepared for the gradual supersession of the large churches staffed by colleges of clergymen by smaller, local churches built and endowed by local thegns and lords, each one served by a desirably resident local priest. Within that pattern the parish clerk found his modest place – the oldest, non-priestly ordained office in the Church of England at the parochial level.

At the Council of Merida in 666 – and later at Toledo in the same century – every parish priest was required to equip himself with clerks to perform the holy offices and to give those clerks food and clothing (*ie* a stipend) or else to pay them wages. In 878 Hincmar of Rheims demanded of rural deans whether each priest had a clerk who could keep school, read the Epistle and sing.[8] The Canons of King Edgar (c 975), thought to be largely inspired by St Dunstan (c 909-988), required every clergyman to have a clerk and to bring that clerk with him to the yearly synod – along with the priest's books and vestments. According to Migne,[9] Pope Leo IV, who welcomed to Rome the five year old Alfred the Great, set out in detail the duties of the clerk and final formality was given to those duties by a Canon of the Council of Nantes, later embodied in Book III of the *Decretals* of Gregory IX in 1230.[10]

So the Parish Clerk secured his place in the Canon Law of the undivided Catholic Church of the West. Grosseteste of Lincoln in 1250, Peckham of Canterbury in 1280, John of Athon before 1350 and William Lyndwood,

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[7] See C Atchley, *The Parish Clerk and his Right to read the Liturgical Epistle* (Alcuin Club Tracts IV) (Longman's Green & Co 1903).
[8] Ditchfield op cit p 17.
[9] Migne *Patrologia Latina* cxv, vol 677 qu Atchley op cit.
[10] *Decretales Gregorii IX*, 3.1.3.

1375-1446,[11] sometime rector of All Hallows, Bread Street, and Bishop of St David's, along with Nicholas de Tudeschi, 1386-1445, generally known to canonists as Panormitanus, are but a few of those who wrote learnedly of the office, duties, privileges and responsibilities of the Parish Clerk.[12]

But if the parish clerk has now arrived – and by 1290 there were some 8,000 parishes in England, 126 of them in the City of London – what of his fellowship or company? Again, we have to look back; and we look back in particular to the ancient parish guilds whose origin 'is lost in the mist which obscures the history of our early English forefathers'.[13] According to Westlake, still our best authority, at least for urban guilds, it was in the reign of Athelstan (925-940) that there is the first hint of a secularly founded *frith-gild* (that is, a group set up and bound together for the maintenance of the peace) exhibiting obligations of a religious character. Within the next hundred years associations of a purely religious character appear to have developed, and by the time of Canute (1017-1035) a friend of his is known to have founded such a guild at Abbotsbury, endowed it with a hall and agreed for it a Rule. That Rule required common worship and fellowship, common alms, support for the sick and prayer for the departed – the essential marks of all the other local religious guilds which succeeded it and flourished in abundance for centuries. Most of these were what are now known as Parish Guilds, formed and endowed by local people, based on the local parish church, cathedral or monastery and devoted to common worship and mutual fellowship and support, with a particular concern for prayers for the living and departed and often for the cult of a particular saint, doctrine or shrine.

Normally in the City of London any mention of guilds tends to be understood at once in terms of the 106 livery companies of today (December 2004). This can cause confusion, for many of the older livery companies of today were in origin guilds merchant, craft or service.[14] Though not in most cases without a religious dimension and in every case with much common fellowship and charitable activity, the livery companies were wholly different in kind, motivation and purpose from the often much older and originally much more numerous parish guilds. When, in response to a writ of Richard II, the parish guilds were required to send in details of their foundation before the Feast of the Purification 1389, a total of no less than

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[11] Lyndwood. *Provinciale Lib* III tit. *De Concessione Prebende.*

[12] Inasmuch as there is almost nothing in that ancient Canon Law touching parish clerks which is repugnant or contrariant to English statute law or to the Royal Prerogative, it is at least arguable that, insofar as they have not been repealed or substantially amended, those parts of the old law are still binding in the Church of England.

[13] HF Westlake, *The Parish Gilds of Mediaeval England* (SPCK 1919) pp 1 et seq.

[14] The Weavers' Company (though No 42 in the civic order of company precedence) has a Charter date related to 1155 and is widely held to be the earliest company. The Saddlers' Company No 25 has a document of 1160 which seems to point to an Anglo-Saxon company existence, though the earliest Saddlers' Charter dates from 1395. The newest company (as at December 2004), that of the International Bankers No 106, received its grant of livery in October 2004.

507 returns were submitted from 25 counties.[15] In the City of London the oldest parish guild so to respond (very early thirteenth century) was that of St Anne in the church of St Owen or St Euan in Newgate (a parish later united to that of St Sepulchre without Newgate).

It is after the fashion of those old parish guilds that the Fraternity of Parish Clerks appears to have come into being – having a concern not like the merchant, craft and service companies for the protection of their trades, the quality of their workmanship and the due enrolment of fit and proper apprentices, but essentially for common worship, prayer and fellowship. The Parish Clerks' Fraternity or Company has never trained or enrolled apprentices nor exercised powers of search or supervision in regard to what the individual parish clerk does. The work of the parish clerk is not a trade or craft, not a *métier* nor a mistery; his Company is a fellowship of independent parochial church officers.

The first written records of a Parish Clerks' Company as such are not easy to establish. William Fitzstephen in his *Description of London* (before 1183) refers to the regular involvement of parish clerks in the performance of scriptural plays at Clerkenwell. There is some support for the suggestion that in 1274 a property in the parish of St Ethelburga, Bishopsgate, was acquired by the parish clerks or for them. In 1391 the clerks undoubtedly received a payment of £10 from the Exchequer for their part in the dramatic productions in and around Clerkenwell and by 1419 they were meeting regularly as an established body at Brewers' Hall. It is probably best to accept that the learned editors of the Company's Bede Roll have made the best judgment possible in their observation that:

> The parish clerks as a distinct but unlicensed body of men capable of corporate action seem to have emerged in London in the late fourteenth century.[16]

More precision cannot be found. Outside the King's Court with its charters and laws and the greater monasteries with their chronicles, cartularies and altar books, documents at this time were few. MT Clanchy[17] has pointed out that the earliest records of an English church court do not appear until 1200; bishops did not develop working offices before that date; the earliest Bishops' Registers, those of Lincoln, date from shortly before 1217. We are back in the days when memory ruled, not written record – at least until the proliferation of documents in the thirteenth century.

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[15] Westlake op cit and pp 38 et seq.

[16] *The Bede Roll of the Fraternity of St Nicholas* ed NW and VA James, 2 vols (London Record Society 2004) p xiv.

[17] I am much indebted to MT Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record* (Blackwell 1993) for this data (see pp 75 *et passim).* CR Cheney has pointed out that 'in England no sign has been seen of diocesan statutes before 1215' (p 35) and that 'among the earliest, if not the very first of English synodal statutes are those of Richard Poore with a date of c 1217-1221': *English Synodialia of the Thirteenth Century* (OUP 1941).

What were they like then those early parish clerks? Recruited originally as local boys into the bishop's *familia*, the majority until the thirteenth century were without doubt tonsured and in minor orders. Many of them were married, much to the displeasure of the papalistically conservative William Lyndwood, who grudgingly conceded that in default of an unmarried clerk, a married person might be admitted so long as he had not been twice married and wore the clerical habit and tonsure. Chaucer's parish clerk, Peter Absolon in *The Miller's Tale* had, however, golden curly hair parted in the middle and had no tonsure. It seems that by the fourteenth century the layman parish clerk had arrived and by the end of that century had become the norm.

According to Gratian,[18] the parish clerk, like the sub-deacon, had to be not less than twenty years old. And he was, of course, in the modern sense, illiterate, but in no sense was he ignorant. The Londoners of the early Middle Ages were not cloth-eared oafs – urban yobs. They might not have been able to read or write but in many ways they were skilful and well informed. Merely to stay alive was a demanding exercise in those days. Illiterate men and women learned by listening, repeating, looking, doing and by the exercise of what Eileen Power once referred to as 'a tenacious memory'.[19] Even the music in church depended upon the memory of the clerk cantor.[20] A new parish clerk learned from his forbears, from the constant repetition of the prayers of the Church, from handling missals, antiphoners and Books of Hours, from looking at pictures, wall-paintings, dooms and images in churches, which, centuries earlier, Gregory the Great had justified, because they enabled the illiterate 'to read by seeing'.

The fourteenth century saw the advent of a laity better informed, at least in part by the preaching of the Friars and some reforming bishops, and inspired by a new moral fervour which, in its turn produced not a little criticism of some established practices and institutions. Already in 1296, the lawyer Pope Boniface VIII, seeking to reassert the powers of the clergy, had begun his Bull *Clericis Laicos* with the memorably provocative words:

> That laymen are notoriously hostile to clerics antiquity relates and recent experience manifestly demonstrates.

By the twelfth century the *clericus* had come to be seen as someone who was necessarily *litteratus,* while a *laicus* was necessarily *illitteratus*. Holy Orders did not enter into it. According to Clanchy, Hubert Walter (d. 1205), perhaps the most outstanding of the administrator Archbishops of

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[18] *Decretum Gratiani* D 77 c iv.

[19] E Power, *The Wool Trade in English Mediaeval History* (OUP 1941) p 25.

[20] 'Sounds', wrote Isidore of Seville (d 636), 'must be held in the memory of man, because they cannot be written' qu Deanesly op cit, p 93. King Alfred's mother showed him a beautifully illuminated book of Saxon poems and when he could recite them all by heart, she fulfilled her promise to give him the book (op cit p 257). Alfred did not learn to read or write until he was twelve.

Canterbury (at least prior to Geoffrey Fisher), was sniffily dismissed by the monastic chronicler at St Augustine's, Canterbury, as *laicus et illitteratus* – because he was neither a theologian nor a canonist.[21] However, as the laity became more involved in ecclesiastical administration, particularly at the parochial level and as literacy and the use of English increased, *clericus* came to mean a common clerk and *litteratus* anyone able to read basic Latin. Again, Holy Orders were not involved. Parish clerks were thus seen as *clerici et litterati.*

These were the men who emerged corporately as the Fraternity of St Nicholas. There is a suggestion in Stow's *Survey of London* of a possible Charter of 1233 from Henry III, but that cannot be authenticated. Reference, however, has already been made to dramatic activity by the clerks from the twelfth century at Skinners' Well and Clerkenwell – the original *fons clericorum.* Further productions followed in 1384 and before Richard II himself in 1390 and again between 1409 and 1411.[22] It was thus to a fraternity in some sense well organised and clearly vigorous that King Henry VI in 1442 granted its first duly authenticated Charter. Henry VI had himself been born some twenty-one years earlier on St Nicholas day (6 December), which accounts no doubt for the moving and majestic terms with which the Charter begins:

> To the CHIEF or PARISH CLERKS of the City of London for the honour and glory of Almighty GOD and of the undefiled and most glorious VIRGIN MARY, His Mother, and on account of that special devotion they especially bore to CHRIST's glorious CONFESSOR, ST NICHOLAS, on whose day or festival WE were first presented into this world, at the hands of a mother ever to be revered …'

– the finest tribute perhaps that Katharine of Valois ever received, and that from a son who needed to be an assured military leader but who was instead as unwarlike as he was unworldly. It has been memorably said of Henry VI that in him 'second childhood succeeded first without the usual interval'[23] in between. Some more recent historians have tended to be gentler in their assessment. Certainly London's parish clerks – like his notable beneficiaries at Eton and King's College, Cambridge – hold him in ceaseless remembrance. At every official gathering of the Parish Clerks Company Henry VI is named prayerfully and thankfully.

There was no question of the Company as chartered by Henry VI becoming a livery company. At no time has the Company applied for a grant of livery – nor has it any intention of doing so. In 1442 the Company already had – and still has – its own 'livery', the ecclesiastical livery of the surplice. As long ago as 1312, in a ruling by Archbishop Robert Winchelsea (1245-1313), upon which Lyndwood commented,[24] it was laid down that 'no Clerk shall be allowed to serve at the altar unless clad in a surplice'. In the Company the wearing of 'the faire white surplice' has constantly been insisted on; in 1508 the clerk of St Edmund the King was cited in the courts for failing so to conform on two weekdays. Ever since 1529 all brethren have been particularly required to wear the livery of the surplice on 'The Feast of the Ascension of Our Lord God' (as the 1639 Charter describes that day) when the annual election of the Master takes place; so vested, the Company was 'on parade' on Ascension Day 2004 at the church of St Martin within Ludgate. In 1566 the vicar of St Giles, Cripplegate, famously objected to clerks wearing surplices at a funeral on the ground that these were 'rags of Popery'. Such a stir was created that the vicar was ultimately deprived of his living.

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[21] FM Powicke, *Henry III and the Lord Edward* (Oxford Clarendon 1947) tells (p 74 and p 134) how Ralph Nevill was not translated from Chichester to Canterbury in 1231 because he was held to be *curialis et illitteratus* ('an illiterate courtier').

[22] As recently as 1972 and 1990 the Clerks of London were still performing their plays – and may do so again before too long.

[23] KB McFarlane, *The Lesser Nobility of Late Mediaeval England* (Oxford Clarendon 1973), p 284. For later opinions, see AJ Pollard, *Late Mediaeval England, 1399-1509* (Longman 2000) pp 116, 137, and RA Griffiths, *The Reign of Henry VI* (1981).

So the Company keeps steadfastly to its own 'livery' of the surplice, though in the understanding of the City, it is designated as a Company 'without livery'. Unlike the livery companies, it does not have a number – 1 to 106 – in the City's civic order of Company precedence; it takes no part in the elections of the Lord Mayor and Sheriffs; it does not admit to membership by the traditional livery company routes of 'servitude, patrimony or redemption'; it admits only those who hold office as parish clerks of certain prescribed qualifying parishes. There is no other way of joining the Company; there are no honorary members, Royal or otherwise.

The Company has a Master (the list of Masters goes back to 1448), two Wardens and a governing Court. All who are admitted to membership become Brethren and that term is used in the inclusive sense of '*Dearly Beloved Brethren*' in the Exhortations of *The Book of Common Prayer*.[25] Those admitted as brethren (men and women) become members of an ecclesiastical company *sui generis*, a company exclusively 'Church of England' in its membership. A lengthy tongue-twisting oath of admission – prescribed in 1639 and so in Laudian terms – still requires candidates to renounce all conventicles, that is to say, all assemblies for worship otherwise than in accordance with the liturgy of the Church of England. Accordingly no 'dissenter' of any kind can be admitted to the Company and any member who ceases to belong to the Church of England will have his name removed.

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[24] Lyndwood *Provinciale Lib III* tit *De Concessione Prebende*.

[25] It was for long held that legally a woman could not be elected to the office of parish clerk, though she might be a sexton (*Olave v Ingram* (1739) 7 Mod Rep 263, 2 Stra 1114). In fact there are many instances from the eighteenth century onwards when women acted as parish clerks. The mediaeval Company appears to have regarded the wives of brethren as 'sisterne' and certainly as a part of the Company's wider family. Many appear in the Bede Roll. There is no evidence, however, of any women having been elected as brethren of the Company prior to 1999. At December 2004, there were five women parish clerks in membership of the Company.

The Company received its first grant of arms in 1448 and a year later, in a second Charter of Henry VI, was required to maintain chaplains at the rebuilt chapel of St Mary Magdalene in Guildhall and there on Michaelmas Day to sing at the Mass of the Holy Ghost for the election of the Lord Mayor. At the Reformation the neighbouring church of St Laurence Jewry and a non-Eucharistic service were substituted. The involvement of the Parish Clerks Company is, however, still maintained in that it is the privilege of the Master of that Company always to be the crucifer at that service.

The Parish Clerks Company was – and remains – a very modest company – recruited from the humbler ranks of society, the so called 'middling sort', from whom came also the churchwardens, constables and jurors, 'the local worthies' who could be relied on to support vigorously their local parish churches in their worship and their social activities, who sought to be good neighbours and who kept an eye on local behaviour. The Company has never engaged in the commercial life of London and so never attracted to membership the City magnates or the county families – no Whittingtons or Greshams, no Crosbys, Pulteneys, Lauries, Palmers or Watneys. It has therefore no great portfolio of property, no array of silver, glass or portraits, no large wine cellar. What little it did have was largely lost when its third Hall in Wood Street was wholly destroyed in the Second World War on 29 December 1940. The Company has never rebuilt and so today is one of the many peripatetic City companies. Among a very few surviving treasures are the ancient crowns used for the crowning of the incoming Master and normally on display at the Victoria and Albert museum, together with the Company's old funeral pall, a modern version of which is used at every Company funeral.

Far and away the greatest treasure of the Company is its Bede Roll. A manuscript of over fifty full folio sheets first begun in 1449 (but with entries going back to the 1420s), the Roll was used liturgically during the Intercessions at Mass to remember living and deceased members of the fraternity, their wives and families. Nearly 7,000 individuals are named up to 1521, many of whom have been clearly identified, including not least the name of King Henry VI himself[26] (only the Skinners Company has anything comparable and that is much less comprehensive).

Particularly interesting is the inclusion of a large number of musicians, especially from the Chapel Royal and Windsor, including Robert Fairfax and Nicholas Ludford. The parish clerks' pioneering contribution to music was as notable as it was to drama. Not for nothing do a prick-song book, the notes of a psalm and angels with trumpets still form part of the Company's achievement of arms.[27]

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[26] In addition to Henry VI, there appear the names of three further kings of England, one queen, many peers of the realm, Lady Margaret Beaufort, some 30 abbots, priors and prioresses, 35 and more (Lord) mayors, including Richard Whittington, 15 or so Masters of the Mercers Company, to say nothing of William Caxton.

Enrolment on the Bede Roll of the Fraternity of St Nicholas was popular, not least because that body could be relied on to put on the best funeral in London – and that at the most competitive price. And it was a proper funeral, with all the trimmings, solemnised with a simple dignity, full assurance and a stark realism befitting the passing of a Christian soul – what Bede called his 'ascending to the heavenly kingdom'. Attended by clerks, it would include the singing of the antiphons *Dirige* (Psalm 5 : 8) and *Placebo* (Psalm 116 : 9), the use of unbleached candles and the ringing of the Passing Bell, a full and explicit Commendation involving the Company pall, incense and water (in remembrance of baptism), an *Obit* on the first anniversary, a *Trental* of requiem Masses and a Year's Mind in perpetuity. Men and women believed. Uncertainty, 'creative' or otherwise, did not enter their consciousness. They may have been credulous and were certainly not untinged by superstition, but as regards death and judgment their Christo-centric hope was 'sure and certain'; they, and not least those of them who were parish clerks, knew what they believed – and they believed with an invincible conviction.

How different are the wistful hesitancies of too many of today's earth-bound Services of Thanksgiving or Celebration following a death. Attended warily with a tight-lipped determination to be cheerful by those who come in purposely bright attire 'to pay their respects' (as they say), these services invariably offer a sentimental outpouring of overworked Bach, Handel and *Crimond*, laced with gobbets of Bunyan, Donne, Scott Holland and T S Eliot and punctuated by musical solos and neatly crafted 'tributes', the latter often directed more to the titillation of the congregation than anywhere else. All too frequently, the whole shapeless confection reaches its climax in that 'organist's delight', the Parry rendition of Blake's *Jerusalem*, itself an amalgam of speculative historical nonsense and visionary contrived imagery, culminating in a coda of self-centred, self-sufficient semi-Pelagian heresy. To all of this it would seem that the only proper clerkly response must be: 'Good Lord, deliver us'.

Like every City of London institution, the Parish Clerks' Fraternity has had its 'ups and downs' – Black Death, riots and rebellions, civil wars, religious Reformation, plagues, fires and two World Wars – but the greatest disaster ever to befall it was none of these; it was the second Chantries Act 1548 (1 Edw 6, c 14). Under that Act all corporations and guilds supporting Masses, *obits* or lights for the departed were held to be intrinsically superstitious and therefore to be dissolved, their assets being forfeit to the Crown.[28]

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[27] William Cowper may be recalled:
Here lies within this tomb so calm
Old Giles – pray sound his knell –
who thought no song was like a psalm
No music like a bell (*On a Parish Clerk* Epitomie 1792).

The doctrine of purgatory had been under serious attack at least since 1528 and there is no denying that the simple belief of earlier parish clerks in the naturalness of continuing loving prayer between living and departed within 'the unceasing traffic between heaven and earth'[29] had become fatally corrupted by the later Middle Ages, not least as a result of the mechanistic and financial considerations associated with the multiplication of Masses and with the notion of a 'purchase of Paradise' secured through drafts, by the sale or grant of Indulgences, on a saintly-accumulated Treasury of Merit. Such was 'the Romish doctrine of Purgatory', as understood and condemned in due course by Article 22 of the Articles of Religion, and probably the one tenet of the unreformed Western Catholic faith which the traditionalist Henry VIII found totally intolerable.

So the axe fell. The only bodies exempted were those – like the livery companies – who could show that they were primarily misteries or crafts within the meaning of the Act. The Parish Clerks' Fraternity did not represent a trade or craft and so was the only City company to suffer total dissolution. In all, 90 collegiate bodies (including the rich Royal College of St Stephen at Westminster), 110 hospitals and 2,374 parish guilds and chantries were destroyed. At a blow a light of local devotion which had lasted for perhaps 700 years was extinguished. It has never been wholly re-lit.[30]

The City Corporation – and especially the Aldermen – fought hard in support of the Fraternity but in vain. Yet the brethren never ceased to meet – and that often in accommodation provided for them by the City Corporation, from whom in 1553 under a different monarch they secured reincorporation and have so continued to this day. Remembrance of the departed remains close to the heart of the Company's worship. At every dinner of the Company the first Toast is always received in silence:

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[28] 'It was an act of spoliation devoid either of excuse in its cause or benefit in its results' (ie to the King's wars in Scotland and France). FA Hibbert, *Influence and Development of English Gilds* qu Westlake op cit p 134.

[29] 'Between heaven and earth there was incessant coming and going. The watchful choir of angels was drawn up against the cohort of demons who swooped on men whose sins called out to them': J Le Goff, *Mediaeval Civilisation*. See also ARCIC II *Church as Communion*, p 48 'The Eucharistic community on earth is a participation *in a larger communion which includes the martyrs and confessors and all who have* fallen asleep in Christ throughout the ages'. For mediaeval man there was little distinction between the planes of earth and heaven – and there was constant traffic between them. CS Lewis noted that Hooker's universe was 'drenched with deity'. The Mediaeval Church believed it.

[30] See Ed CJ Kitching, *London and Middlesex Chantry Certificate, 1548* (London Record Society 1980). See also Westlake op cit p 135. In 1548 St Magnus church still had twelve or more chantry priests and St Dunstan in the East and St James, Garlickhythe, had ten each. At St Paul's forty-eight chantry priests served fifty or so chantries. Excluding all these, there were some 250 chantry priests in the City in 1548.

> To the immortal and pious memory of King Henry III, King Henry VI, King Edward IV, King James I and King Charles I ... and of all brethren departed this life. May their souls through the mercy of God rest in peace.

The Reformation was indeed traumatic for the parish clerk and his Company but the continuities of the Reformation are probably more remarkable than its discontinuities. The continuity of the three Orders of the historic Ministry of the Church – consciously retained – was always evident as was the continuity of a Prayer Book, Protestant or Reformed in substance but, in the vivid words of Eamon Duffy, 'saturated with echoes of mediaeval Catholicism', not least in its Occasional Offices.[31] Likewise largely unchanged, there continued the church's courts and their officers and (albeit fortuitously) the greater part of the Pre-Reformation canon law.[32] More recently, Diarmaid MacCulloch has emphasised the significant – and surprising – continuity of the cathedrals with their music and choral foundations. It is significant, too, that Elizabethan bishops continued to fulfil the requirements of Pre-Reformation Episcopal church government and discipline,[33] to act as the tax collectors of the clergy and, in some instances, notwithstanding reduced resources, to pursue Pre-Reformation Episcopal life-styles rather than those of their Reformed counterparts on the Continent.[34]

Other non-theological features, about which so much less has been written, also persisted – the continuing poverty of the clergy (at least until the closing years of the sixteenth century) and the continuing exploitation of their parochial revenues following a major post-Dissolution increase in lay patronage (always unpalatable to Rome), which meant that by 1603 one-third of the parochial beneficies had become impropriate.[35] Above all, there was an administrative, structural and institutional continuity. This combined with 'a stubborn ritual conservatism'[36] – from the Queen downwards – to produce an increasingly conformist acceptance of the peace and comfort of keeping one's head down, whatever the prevailing theological or liturgical enthusiasms.

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[31] E Duffy in a lecture to the Ecclesiastical Law Society on 9 December 2003, reproduced at (2004) 7 Ecc LJ 429, and in S Platten (ed) *Anglicanism and the Western Christian Tradition*, (Canterbury 2003), Ch 3, p 42.

[32] 'In one of the great untidinesses of the Reformation the Protestant church courts of England went on using the Pope's Canon Law': D MacCulloch in a lecture to the Ecclesiastical Law Society on 9 December 2003, reproduced at (2004) 7 Ecc LJ 418. See also MacCulloch's book review in (2005) 8 Ecc LJ 109-111 and his contribution (ch 2) to S Platten (ed) '*Anglicanism*' op cit.

[33] Excommunication declined as a sentence but it was not until 1612 that the last person was burned in England for heresy. See A Foster in R O'Day and F Heal (eds) *Continuity and Chance* (Leicester University Press 1976) p 43.

[34] Men like Parker, Whitgift and Toby Matthew of York were lavish and hospitable entertainers; each had over a hundred servants and in their charitable giving, in life and death, strove to emulate their Pre-Reformation predecessors: see J Barlatsky in R O'Day and F Heal (eds) *Princes and Paupers* (Leicester University Press 1981) at pp 114 et seq. See also P Croft for William Cecil, Lord Burghley (d 1598), 'a man who never moved much beyond the mid-Tudor years' and S Platten (ed) *Anglicanism* op cit at pp 77, 78.

[35] See ML Zell in *Princes and Paupers*, op cit p 41.

[36] See Duffy lecture op cit at (2004) 7 Ecc LJ 429, and in S Platten (ed) '*Anglicanism*' op cit at p 45.

It was within that emergent setting that the country vicar of Morebath (Christopher Trychay) from 1520 to 1574[37] and, possibly, the City rector of St Mary-at-Hill (Alain Percy) from 1521 to 1560 were content to remain in post – as were the average churchwarden and parish clerk.

Of course, there was change. Minor orders ceased from about 1550. The lay parish clerk became less 'a servant of the sanctuary' as the parish priest himself became less of a mediator between an individual soul and God, and more of a reformed, godly and resident pastor and preacher. So the parish clerk became equally a pastoral leader of the prayers and praises of the congregation. From 1640 he wore a sombre gown and within a century he was to occupy an elevated place in a centrally sited and all-dominating pulpit.

From 1536, when Thomas Cromwell first introduced them, it became the parish clerk's job to collect the necessary details for the compilation of the Registers of Baptisms, Weddings and Funerals. Ten years later, following frequent outbreaks of plague, the Lord Mayor and the Parish Clerks Company agreed that parish clerks of the City should submit details of the deaths of freemen. By 1592 proper weekly Bills of Mortality had come into being for the City, an area which was gradually extended to include 'within the Bills', as the saying went, the ever-expanding outreaches of built-up London. In 1625 a press was set up in the Company's Hall to print the weekly Bills, a task which the Company continued to carry out until 28 September 1858 – a remarkable contribution by the clerks of London to London's social history.

Following the introduction of the Elizabethan Poor Law, there developed an increasing adaptation of the ecclesiastical parish to secular uses and in the administration of the laws relating to settlement, vagrancy, poor relief and foundling children, churchwarden and parish clerk became deeply involved as parish officers. So, according to Dr Johnson, 'a parish clerk should be ... able to make a Will or write a letter for anybody in the parish' – a counter-weight perhaps to the more publicised picture of the comic eighteenth century clerk high-lighted in Hogarth's 'Sleeping Congregation' or Kipling's 'Smuggler's Song'.

Alexander Pope criticised them; William Cowper lauded them.[38] Perhaps the fairest visual picture remains that of Edward Gilpin, parish clerk of Bradford-upon-Avon, a painting once attributed to Thomas Gainsborough but now consigned to the deeper recesses of the Tate Gallery. Seated bareheaded in his well-worn dark serge with white stock, Gilpin clutches his reading-easel with its large Bible, from which he looks up with eyes that are tired but not without the possibility of a twinkle. As Benjamin Payne, parish clerk of St Ann, Blackfriars, put it in his *Vade-Mecum* of 1694:[39]

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[37] E Duffy, *The Voices of Morebath* (Yale University Press 2001), esp at pp 54-64, for the ever-controversial issue of the parish clerk's wages.

[38] 'severe in whipping forth dogs from the Temple all except the lapdog of good widow Howard ... yet they were men of a clear and sweet voice and of becoming gravity' Pope's *Words*, vol VI, p 248.

> [The Parish Clerk] is more than a door-keeper in the House of God, he is *Servus in Sacris*, conversant in all the Holy Offices of the Church ...

It was the nineteenth century – not only in relation to Bills of Mortality and Civil Registration – that deprived the parish clerk of most of his historic duties. The after-effect of an Act of 1844[40] was the loss of most of his canonical duties. A judgment of 1891 (*Lawrence v Edwards*) held that the parish clerkship was a temporal office.[41] Reform succeeded reform in the areas of municipal corporations, poor relief, asylums, public health and elementary education. New bodies and new offices mushroomed. In the Church of England Readers, deaconesses and new representative bodies appeared and an Anglican Communion was born.

The parish clerk had little left to do, although successive Parochial Church Council (Powers) Measures have preserved the power to appoint and dismiss him. Today that power is exercised not by the incumbent alone as of old but by the incumbent and parochial church council jointly. The Parochial Church Council (Powers) Measure 1921 deprived him of his freehold[42] and so these days he is appointed on such terms and for such a period as are mutually agreed between him and the incumbent and PCC.

Happily, under the Revised Canons Ecclesiastical (1969) of the Church of England – the *Corpus Fisher Hansonensis* (as perhaps they should be styled!) – the parish clerk's position has been reasserted and he is proclaimed in Canon E 3 as a canonical 'lay officer' of the Church – albeit in terms somewhat briefer than those of Canon 91 of 1604. Any parish (or City of London guild church) can have a parish clerk but though the appointments of parish administrator, pastoral assistant, parish secretary, etc, abound, few parishes have chosen to appoint a parish clerk.

The City of London and the churches of London's original 'suburbs' have, however, remained faithful. The 150 'qualifying' ancient parishes of this area of old London are prescribed by or under the terms of the sixth and latest of the Company's Royal Charters, that of Charles I of 1639, which still governs the Company's affairs.

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[39] Quoted Adams op cit pp 69, 79.

[40] Lecturers and Parish Clerks Act 1844 (7 & 8 Vict, c 59).

[41] *Lawrence v Edwards* [1891] 2 Ch 72. See also *Lawrence v Edwards* [1891] 1 Ch 144.

[42] Parochial Church Councils (Powers) Measure 1921 (11 & 12 Geo 5, No 1), s 6(iii).

The Parish Clerks is thus a small Company. It cannot exceed 150; in practice it rarely exceeds 100. 'Parish', of course, has to be understood in terms of London's 'ancient' parishes, that is, those existing prior to the Union of Parishes Act 1907. In today's City of London there are twenty-two modern parishes but within the area of those twenty-two modern parishes there are no less than 108 'ancient' parishes, each of which is still entitled to its parish clerk. Thus the modern parish of St Magnus the Martyr comprises the ancient parishes of St Magnus, St Michael, Crooked Lane, and St Margaret, New Fish Street – just one still standing church but three ancient parishes, the parish clerks of all three being appointed by the incumbent and PCC of the modern St Magnus parish. The rector and PCC of St Vedast, Foster Lane, appoint to no less than thirteen ancient parishes!

The names of the ancient parishes often sound quaint but they are woven deeply into the tapestry of London's ever living history. Even the most erudite Blue Badge guide might have difficulty in directing an enquirer to the ancient parishes of St John Zachary, St Benet Sherehog and St Peter-le-Poer.[43] For the Company those names remain most important for it is by their ancient parish titles that brethren of the Company always address and toast one another.

In some cases, the London parish clerk still maintains the registers, assists at the altar, reads the Epistle and lessons and occupies a prescribed pew. More often, today's 'parish clerk' is more recognisable as a churchwarden, Reader, organist, verger, PCC secretary or treasurer. It is from the ranks of these that the modern Company tends largely to be recruited – with a generous sprinkling of church architects, archivists, lawyers, accountants, historians and, most importantly, stalwart congregation supporters. The Company remains hospitable and charitable; but it is very conscious that it is not just another City Company or dining club. It maintains its radical separation from the livery companies, seeing itself still as the religious fraternity of St Nicholas, and as a focus for lay witness in and to the modern City of London and its neighbours. The liturgy of the Church of England takes pride of place at every Company function – and always with a very visible concern for the servant Mission of the Church of England and her Unity in the one Lord and Church of the living and departed.

The Company has a goodly heritage. Let three vignettes suffice to end the story – at least to date. First, there is the King in Shakespeare's *Richard II*, responding to his rebellious nobles:

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[43] A map showing colourfully the parishes of the City of London prior to the City of London (Union of Parishes) Act 1907 (7 Edw. 7 cap cxi) has been published by the London Topographical Society.

> God save the King. Will no one say AMEN?
> Am I both Priest and Clerk? Well then, AMEN,
> God save the King! Although I be not he:
> And yet, AMEN, if Heaven do think him me.[44]

Secondly, there is Jeremiah Horrocks, one of the first two people to detect the Transit of Venus. But when the time came, it was Sunday 24 November 1639 and Jeremiah could not see the first Observation, for his first duty that morning was to be in church. He was – so the story goes – the parish clerk of Much Hoole, near Preston. He died at the age of 22 and is often regarded as the father of British astro-physics. Finally, there is the earliest biographer of Archbishop Thomas Cranmer. Writing anonymously in 1557, within one year of the Archbishop's martyrdom, he records that Cranmer learned his grammar of 'a rude parish clerk'.[45]

In the time-honoured style of the City of London, may that same 'rude parish clerk', to whom so much is owed, and all his brethren, living and departed, including not least those currently in membership of the Parish Clerks Company of London, flourish 'root and branch – for ever'.

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[44] The saying of a loud AMEN has always been seen as a particular responsibility of the parish clerk:

> Alas, poor John
> is dead and gone
> who often toll'd the Bell
> And with a spade
> Dug many a grave
> And said AMEN as well.

Epitaph John Blackburn, Scothorne, Lincs 1739/40 quoted in Ditchfield, op cit p 93.

[45] D MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer: A Life* (Yale University Press 1996) p 15.