

Sacred Mysteries: the Abbey's shrine for Henry VIII's grandmother



We're lucky still to have the brilliant Gothic glasshouse of Henry VII's chapel at Westminster Abbey. It might have been destroyed in the war – or earlier. After all, only outraged defence by parishioners saved the neighbouring church of St Margaret's from demolition by the Duke of Somerset's men who in 1549 came to tear it down for stone to build Somerset House.

That detail comes from a lecture given in Henry VII's chapel itself by the Cambridge historian Richard Rex last night as part of celebrations for the 500th anniversary of its dedication. His focus was the role played in her son's project by Lady Margaret Beaufort (1443-1509), who in her time was known as "the King's Mother", rather like our late Queen Mother.

We think of her as a founder of Cambridge colleges (Christ's and St John's), but Dr Rex made the case for her being "the first woman in English history to exercise real public power".

What I found interesting in the exercise of that power was the spreading, by the circle of scholarly clerics with whom she surrounded herself, of devotion to the Holy Name of Jesus. It marked the whole religious landscape with what Dr Rex called something of an "obsession" with Jesus. This runs counter to the old myth that devotion to saints in the Middle Ages obscured the centrality of Jesus Christ. The particular focus at the beginning of the 16th century was the humanity of Jesus as God made man.

This cult was encapsulated in "the world's first logo", the IHS. It had been popularised in Italy by St Bernardine half a century or so earlier. He took it from the first letters of the name of Jesus in Greek, But, as Dr Rex pointed out, in the Latin world it was also regarded as an acronym for Iesus Hominum Salvator – Jesus, Humanity's Saviour.

One of Lady Margaret's household clergy, Henry Hornsby, Master of Peterhouse, Cambridge, wrote a liturgy for the feast of the Name of Jesus, not yet a universal church festival. The scholar John Colet, a friend of Lady Margaret's spiritual director, Bishop John Fisher, founded the Confraternity of the Holy Name of Jesus at St Paul's Cathedral (where it found a popular home in the crypt).

A man who shared this devotion was John Islip, Abbot of Westminster from 1500 till his death in 1532, whose support was essential to further the construction of Henry VII's chapel.

Islip had his personal logo, or rather rebus, carved on the stones of his own chantry chapel at Westminster, which survives, if modified, today. The rebus showed an eye and a slip or leafy cutting. So in the chapel where Mass was to be said to benefit his soul, Islip alternated his rebus with the IHS device (to my mind rather as, in a medieval painting of the Nativity, a donor is brought close to the infant Jesus). Islip's chantry was also known as the Jesus chapel.

Lady Margaret herself chose to translate into English a section of the Christian classic *The Imitation of Christ* that deals with Holy Communion. Henry VII's chapel was intended to function as a place where the Eucharist was celebrated, and, as Dr Rex explained, it was partly funded and no doubt planned by Lady Margaret as a shrine for Henry VI, whose saintly relics were to be brought from Windsor.

But the lecture also touched on Lady Margaret's tomb in the chapel. Fisher wrote a biography of her (now lost), which must have been like a saint's life, for in a memorial sermon he likened her to a scriptural saint, Martha, and "expected Lady's Margaret's tomb in this holy place to become as much a venue for miracles as that of her cousin Good King Henry VI".

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