

# A Chantry in Kildwick Church

## Introduction

Chantries were small religious establishments, typically founded by rich individuals, often by means of a bequest within the individual's will, to provide for masses to be said for the soul of the founder, in order to speed its passage through purgatory.

In Yorkshire, chantries became particularly popular in the later medieval period. They all employed a priest, who received an income from chantry lands, to sing or say masses. In addition the priest may have been required to assist the parish priest and educate local children.

Depending upon the value of the endowment the chantry masses may have been held in a small dedicated building close to the founder's parish church, in an extension to the church, or in an area set aside within the church that was perhaps screened- or curtained-off from the rest of the building. Chantries may have had their own communion vessels and plate or used that belonging to the church.

Chantries were not affected by the dissolution of the monasteries in the 1530s. Henry VIII was no religious reformer but he needed money to waste on war with France and the monasteries provided an easy source of revenue for the crown. It was only in 1545, when more money was needed, that Henry's avarice turned to the much smaller, but much more numerous, chantries.

Following the act of 1545, a survey of all the chantries in England was carried out but very few were dissolved as the act was rendered void by the monarch's death, in January 1547. However, this reprieve was short lived.

For Henry's successor, Edward VI, the Catholic doctrines concerning purgatory and the concept of the living interceding on behalf of the dead ran contrary to his radical Protestant beliefs. The opportunity to raise money for the new regime while simultaneously dealing a blow to Catholic traditions was too good to miss and a new Chantries Act was introduced in 1547, leading to their dissolution.

A significant difference between the two Chantry Acts was that the 1547 version allowed for any chantry provisions deemed beneficial to society at large, such as education and poor relief, could be retained. By this means, many chantries would continue and form the basis of local schools.

## The Kildwick chantry

The survey authorised by the 1545 Chantries Act identified a chantry associated with Kildwick Church, called “The Chantry of Our Lady”.

### Establishment and operation of the Kildwick chantry

In her will dated 12th March 1505 and executed by Henry Clifford (later 1st Earl of Cumberland), the widow Margaret Blaine provided for a chantry priest to “pray for the soul of the said Founder and all Christian souls and to help [with] divine services in the Choir ... and also to sing Mass of Our Lady upon Saturday and Sunday ...”

The survey reported that the chantry was within the body of Kildwick Church, and had no plate or other goods of its own. The chantry priest – named as Stephen Ellis – received income from land rents totalling 74s 8d a year, plus a further amount of up to 12s a year paid by the Church for help that he might provide to the parish priest.

The land belonging to the chantry was rented out in a number of small parcels, and the tenants and amounts received from each was recorded:

A Close called Oldfeilde containing 3 acres, in the tenure of John Ellys	6s 8d
One messuage in the tenure of James Smyth	12s 8d
James Wilkinson for 1/3rd of an acre	0s 8d
One acre of land in the tenure of Thomas Duyer	6s
Five acres of land in the tenure of William Bawdwen	10s
Five acres of land in the tenure of Richard Walshe	10s
A rent going furth Conenley Hall	8s
One oxgang of land in the tenure of Arthure Jackson	10s
John Barret, one oxgang of land	10s
Gilbert Thomson holdyth one Cotage	2s

The survey noted that no land had been sold since the chantry was founded.

### The dissolution of Margaret Blaine’s chantry

Because the two Chantry Acts came so close together, there was no need, following the second act, to fully re-survey each establishment. At Kildwick, as in most other places, all that was required was a quick check that nothing significant had changed and the dissolution could then take place.

For the Kildwick chantry, the following additional points were noted:

- The parish totalled approximately 1234 (?) souls and had a circuit of about 8 miles
- It was administered by a single vicar
- Stephen Ellis was the chantry priest. He was described as “scholemaster of the freeschole in Skipton”

## Did the Kildwick chantry have an afterlife ? (A bit of speculation)

Was it really the case that the chantry priest at Kildwick, Stephen Ellis, was also a schoolmaster in Skipton ?

There is good evidence that he was.

The survey of the chantries associated with Skipton Parish Church recorded Stephen Ellis as the incumbent priest of “The Chantry of St. Nicholas”. This chantry, founded by one Peter Toller, a clerk, was not only tasked with saying masses for the soul of the founder and all other Christian souls but also “to kepe a grammer skole to the children of the same towne”.

The additional information provided in response to the second Chantries Act changed the emphasis and suggested that this chantry’s sole purpose was educational – going so far as to call it “The Chantry of St. Nicholas used as a Free Grammar Schole”. It also praised the abilities of Stephen Ellis as a teacher, describing him as “... incumbent and scholmaster, 23 yeres of age, a good grammerian [teacher] (having scollers to the number of 120 and hath kept scole there theis fyve yeres past) ...”

Clearly the aim here was for Skipton to take advantage of the rule, introduced in the second act, that where a chantry provided a school, any assets that went towards education should be retained by the local community.

But the people at Skipton may also have had their eyes on Stephen Ellis’s other chantry, the one at Kildwick, as a potential source of revenue for their school. It was noted that in addition to the £4 16s 4d received annually from rents due to the St. Nicholas chantry, Stephen Ellis had “one other chantry in Kildwick to the value of £4”. (Presumably this was made up of the land rents due, 74s 8d, plus some of the additional 12s he could claim from the church.)

The Skipton folk also rewrote the history of the Kildwick chantry to better suit their purpose, describing it as having been “unto him [Ellis] given by the right honourable Henry now the Earl of Cumberland ... to keep a school ... [in a document] dated the 35th year of the late King of famous memory Henry VIII [1544]”.

Here there is no mention of Margaret Blaine, and no mention of Stephen Ellis being employed to say masses for her soul. Instead, the Kildwick chantry – now founded by a member of the Tudor aristocracy – has a purely secular function, as a school.

This is the first mention of a school being operated at Kildwick, although it is not unreasonable to speculate that, in addition to his ecclesiastical duties, Ellis may also have run a small school in Kildwick Church.

What is beyond any doubt, however, is that the grammar school at Skipton was saved, with or without the assistance of funds from Kildwick, and that it continues to exist to this day.

Ermysted’s School in Skipton claims Peter Toller, the benefactor of the St. Nicholas chantry, as its founder.

## Sources

Source material for this piece came from “The Publications of the Surtees Society” volumes 91 and 92. Both are available online and in the public domain.