

Polychromy and Meaning in the Angel Roof Sculptures of The Church of St Agnes, Cawston

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Abstract: In the fifteenth century, a fashion grew for filling the roofs of parish churches in eastern England with sculptures of angels. Whilst some sculptures have lost their colour and others were likely never painted, extremely rare surviving polychromy at the Church of St Agnes in Norfolk offers a unique opportunity to consider the iconography of these artworks in new ways. This paper explores how the iconography and polychromy of this sculptural program relates to the uncertain contemporary climate of reform engendered by the spread of the Lollard heresy in the region, arguing that multi-coloured displays were designed to oppose the iconophobic position of the Lollards by communicating the idea of universal hierarchies, from angelic orders down to mankind.

Keywords: Late medieval England; Polychromy; Iconography; Architectural Sculpture.

ES Policromía y significado en las esculturas de ángeles del techo de la iglesia de St Agnes, Cawston.

Resumen: En el siglo quince, estaba de moda llenar los techos de las iglesias en el este de Inglaterra con esculturas de ángeles de madera. Mientras que algunas de ellas han perdido su color y otras, lo mas probable, que nunca fueran pintadas, en la Iglesia de St Agnes en Norfolk, hay un raro ejemplo de policromía que ha sobrevivido y ofrece una oportunidad única y nueva de considerar la iconografía de estas obras de arte. Este artículo explora cómo la iconografía y policromía de estas esculturas, se relaciona con el incierto clima de reforma contemporánea, creado por la propagación de la herejía de los Lollards en la zona, discutiendo que las manifestaciones de color se diseñaron como oposición a la icono-fobia de los Lollards comunicando la idea de las jerarquías universales, desde las órdenes angelicales hasta la humanidad.

Palabras clave: Finales de la época medieval en Inglaterra; Policromía; Iconografía; esculturas arquitectónicas.

Sumario: 1. Introduction. 2. Historiography. 3. Were Medieval Angel Roof Sculptures Typically Painted? 4. The Significance of Angels in Late Medieval East Anglia. 5. The Importance of Colour at St Agnes Church. 6. Conclusion. 7. Bibliographical References.

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1. Introducción

In the most easterly counties of southern England, fifteenth-century angel sculptures proliferate in the roofs of parish churches.¹ Existing scholarship has focused on defining so-called "angel roofs" as a genre of architectural sculpture.² Less attention has been devoted to contemplating the wider environments in which these sculptures existed, both in terms of architectural space and in terms of a

parishioner's experience of viewing an angel-filled roof during a service. This article explores what the colour scheme and iconography of the angels in the Church of St Agnes in Cawston, Norfolk can tell us about the meaning of these sculptures. I argue that the polychromy of the angels at St Agnes may have been intended to invoke thoughts of Judgement (figure 1). The iconography of the angel sculptures, their lofty setting and their compositional arrangement

¹ Approximately 145 of the 170 known examples of medieval open timber roofs with angel sculptures are situated in the most easterly counties of southern England. See: Michael Rimmer, *The Angel Roofs of East Anglia* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2015). 3.

² Michael Rimmer, *The Angel Roofs of East Anglia* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2015). See also: Sarah Cassell, "Structure and Image in Late Medieval East Anglian Angel Roofs." 56.



Fig. 1. Standing angel, St Agnes Church; carved oak with original polychromy; (c.1460); Cawston, Norfolk. Source: Author.

that alludes to different orders of angel, reinforces the concept of a divinely ordained universal hierarchy where everyone on heaven and earth knew their place. This rare surviving original colour scheme communicates the idea of angels as dreaded overseers and the emphasis on heavenly hierarchies might have been prompted in part as a response to the radical, levelling worldview proposed by heretics known as Lollards, who had a strong presence in East Anglia.³

After 1382 when the ideas of theologian John Wycliffe (c.1328-1384) were deemed heretical by the Church, England was gripped by a debate about the role of art in religion. Wycliffe was the progenitor of the Lollard movement; a subculture that rejected devotional images, branding them “blind sticks” and “dead stones.”⁴ While these iconoclasts burnt images, scores of iconoclasts were themselves burnt over the course of the fifteenth century. So serious were anxieties surrounding the presence of art in religion that to criticize devotion to images became the most conspicuous marker of heresy alongside rejections of sacramental doctrine. The popularity of angel roof sculptures could be, in part, a creative response by the Lollards’ opponents to counter the threat posed by the destabilising presence of a significant vocal subculture that waxed and waned in vitality in different localities throughout the fifteenth century.

The first hammerbeam roof to be carved with prominent angel sculptures was Westminster Hall in London.⁵ The first church with a systematic programme of angel roof sculptures outside London dates from c.1400-1405 and is found in the chapel of ease of St Nicholas, Lynn.⁶ The first Lollard to be burnt at the stake in 1401 was William Sawtre, a Lynn priest at the mother church of St Margaret’s.⁷ As a chapel of ease, St Nicholas was subordinate to St Margaret’s and provided local capacity for parishioners to worship. The thrusting merchant class who commissioned the roof at St Nicholas may well have wanted to assert an independent identity with the ostentatious angel sculptures, distancing themselves from St Margaret’s and any possible association with Sawtre.⁸ As fears about heresy in the region spread – evidence for which culminates in an inquisition in the Norwich diocese between 1428 and 1431 – a regional trend for filling open-timber roofs in parish churches with carvings of large angels grew

³ Margit Thøfner and Sandly Heslop, “Introduction: On Faith, Objects and Locality,” in *Art, Faith and Place in East Anglia*, ed. Elizabeth Mellings Margit Thøfner, T. A. Heslop (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2012). 1-19. Intersections between heresy and art and architecture are most fully explored in: Oliver Coulson, “Bind Sticks and Dead Stones: Iconoclasm and Religious Art and Architecture in England, c.1382-1500” (PhD Brown University, 2023).

⁴ The words of an unnamed Lollard, writing at the turn of the fifteenth century are typical of the tendency to emphasize the materiality of an image to call attention to its object status, and therefore, an absence of life: “riche men clothen dede stockis & stonys with precious clothis, with gold & silver & perlis & gaynesse to the world” F. D. Matthew, ed., *The English Works of Wycliffe, Hitherto Unpublished* (London: Trübner, 1880). 210.

⁵ Lynn Courtenay, “The Westminster Hall Roof and Its 14th-Century Sources,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 43, no. 4 (1984). 295-309. Rimmer, *The Angel Roofs of East Anglia*. 7.

⁶ The roof of St. Nicholas chapel in Lynn, Norfolk, has been dendrochronologically dated to c.1400. Cassell, “Structure and Image in Late Medieval East Anglian Angel Roofs.” 56.

⁷ Concilia Magnae Britanniae et Hiberniae, A Synodo Verolamensi A.D. CCCXVI ad Londinensem A.D. [MDCCXVII]. Accedunt constitutiones et alia ad historiam Ecclesiae Anglicanae spectantia. , iii. 254-263. Ex. Reg Aurdnel, II, fol. 178.

⁸ Coulson, “Bind Sticks and Dead Stones: Iconoclasm and Religious Art and Architecture in England, c.1382-1500.” 114-115. In 1378, a group of approximately seventy-seven local burgesses hatched a plot to gain the right to perform the sacraments in St Nicholas Chapel. They sent a priest to obtain a papal bull from Pope Urban VI, authorising sacramental privileges. The bull was deemed to be fake; a furore ensued. The latent local desire for sacramental privileges remained, however, and was almost fulfilled in January 1432, when a resolution of Lynn council discussed a letter to the Prior of Norwich, which requested St Nicholas be granted the desired rights. Edward Beloe, *Our Borough, Our Churches: King’s Lynn* (Cambridge: Macmillan and Bowes, 1899). 53-55; 142-143. *The Red Register of King’s Lynn*, II vols., vol. II, ed. R. F. Isaacson (King’s Lynn: Thew & Son, 1922). 142.

over several decades. Any artistic trend may have multiple drivers and influences. However, this article explores the idea that the Lollard challenge may have been a motivating factor that spurred the fashion for this genre of architectural sculpture.

The angels at St Agnes Church offer a rare opportunity to study an original colour scheme in situ. Late medieval parish church sculpture functioned as part of a coordinated programme of display designed to augment the performance of the liturgy – particularly the ritual celebration of Mass. I outline how these sculptures invoked the senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch, creating an environment that made the experience of worshipping in these churches dynamic and captivating. Parish churches reacted to the threat of nonconformism by reasserting their necessity as sacred sites to guide the laity towards salvation. Reading the Bible in fields and private dwellings as Lollards did was not, the Church believed, sufficient to reach heaven.⁹ The art and architecture of a parish church designated it as a sacred space, dramatised the liturgy, and created a spiritual environment with special potential to bridge the gap between heaven and earth. Roof-dwelling angel sculptures are arguably the most overt and visible statement of this intent.

2. Historiography

To date, historians have studied the impact of Lollardy almost entirely through textual evidence. This article builds on that valuable body of research and takes an object-based approach to explore one particular intersection between art and heresy in late-medieval England. Gordon Rupp, Anne Hudson, Claire Cross, and Margaret Aston are among the most influential voices who argue convincingly that Lollardy represented a significant threat to the Church.¹⁰ The greatest weight of recent scholarship has examined doctrinal differences.¹¹ Less attention has been devoted to the impact of heresy on the material culture of late medieval England.

By the end of the fourteenth century, there was already a rich tradition of questioning the appropriate role of art and architecture in monastic contexts.¹²

Wycliffe's texts eventually had a wider impact than earlier monastic debates because they reached a broader lay audience through a growing network of itinerant preachers. Apart from asserting that there was no scriptural authority for Christ's sacramental presence at the Mass and denying the necessity of oral confession, by 1382 Wycliffe had declared that the Pope was: "the chief Antichrist."¹³ Wycliffe implored the faithful to watch out for the "pseudopapas" and the antichrist's accomplices: "the monks, canons and friars."¹⁴ Disendowment (a forced redistribution of Church property and wealth) was Wycliffe's practical solution to rid the world of the antichrist and his followers.

After a Lollard coup known as the "Oldcastle Revolt" failed in 1414, calls for disendowment waned.¹⁵ However, trial records indicate that grassroots Lollards had been firmly inculcated with the idea that the Church should not involve itself in temporal matters of secular politics or the accrual of private wealth.¹⁶ To most Lollards in the fifteenth-century, the Reformation of the following century would have seemed a distant dream. The dramatic changes to organised religion that were unleashed by Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries (begun 1535) marked a seismic shift in Church doctrine, from encouraging image worship to full-blown iconoclasm.¹⁷ The dramatic losses of religious art that occurred in the sixteenth century and again during Oliver Cromwell's 'Interregnum' (1649-1660) have overshadowed the clashes over images that took place in the fifteenth century. Iconoclasts shape art in ways beyond simply destroying it. Although there was no state-sponsored destruction under the reigns of the last Plantagenet

www.medart.pitt.edu/texts/Saint-Denis/SugerAdmin.html. Accessed September, 2023. See also: See: Gerhart Ladner, "Terms and Ideas of Reform," in *Renaissance and Renewal in the Twelfth Century*, ed. Robert Benson and Giles Constable (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982). C. H. Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism* (London: Longman, 2001). Mette Birkedal Bruun, *The Cistercian Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). Michael Carter, *Art and Architecture of the Cistercians in Northern England, c.1300-1540* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2019).

⁹ Margaret Aston, "Lollardy and Literacy," *History* 62 (1977); Aston, "Lollardy and Literacy," 347-371.

¹⁰ Gordon Rupp, *Studies in the making of the English Protestant tradition, mainly in the reign of Henry VIII* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1947). Anne Hudson, *The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1998). Claire Cross, *Church and people, 1450-1660: the triumph of the laity in the English church* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1976). Aston, "Lollardy and Literacy." Margaret Aston, *Lollards and Reformers: Images and Literacy in Late Medieval Religion* (London: Hambleton Continuum, 1984).

¹¹ The most comprehensive examination of which beliefs were seen by religious authorities as denoting an individual's membership of a heretical subculture in late-medieval England is undertaken by Patrick Hornbeck in his 2010 book: Patrick Hornbeck, *What Is a Lollard? Dissent and Belief in Late Medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

¹² In 1125, for example, Bernard of Clairvaux famously argued against ostentatious displays in religious art and architecture. Bernard's words, almost certainly directed at the Cluniacs rather than the laity, seem to encourage the rejection of superfluous ornament because of its potential to cause unnecessary distraction. "Bernard of Clairvaux: Apology," History Department, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA, 1996. <https://>

¹³ John Wycliffe, "De Cristo et suo adversario Anticristo," in *John Wyclif's Polemical Works in Latin*, ed. Rudolf Buddensieg (London: Trübner, 1966). See: Volume 2: 679, 19; 680, 5.

¹⁴ Curtis Bostick, *The Antichrist and the Lollards* (Leiden: Brill, 1998). 67. "Et oportet fideles armari precipue contra quattuor sectas et complices earundem, scilicet contra pseudopapas cum suis filiis et contra tres sectas ypocritarum, scilicet monachos, canonicos et fratres, ex cautela dyaboli ad onus ecclesie introductas." See: Wycliffe, "Cruciata," in, R. Buddenseig, ed., *Wyclif's Polemical Works in Latin*. Vol. 2, 599, 15-19.

¹⁵ Martin Heale, *Monasticism in late medieval England, c. 1300-1535: selected sources* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009). 67.

¹⁶ Andrew Brown, "Reforming the 'inner' life: Orthodoxy and Heresy," in *Church and Society in England, 1000-1500* (Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). 165-168. Scholars disagree about whether Lollardy was devoid of supporters among the upper classes after 1414. For an alternative view see: Colin Richmond, "Introduction," in *Lollardy and the Gentry in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. Margaret Aston and Colin Richmond (Stroud: St. Martin's Publishing, 1997). 1-27. For Lollard views on the temporal wealth of the church, see: John A. F. Thomson, *The later Lollards, 1414-1520* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965). 17.

¹⁷ Eamon Duffy, *The stripping of the altars: traditional religion in England, c.1400-c.1580* (London: Yale University Press, 2005). 450.

kings, as there had been under regimes in Byzantium in the eighth and ninth centuries and Henry VIII and Edward VI in the sixteenth, this does not mean that Lollardy had no impact on art.¹⁸

Ann Nichols has suggested that the high number of octagonal fonts showing the seven sacraments in East Anglia indicate that Lollard anti-sacramentalism made it necessary to provide worshippers with powerful visual statements to reinforce belief in the efficacy of every sacrament.¹⁹ In her pioneering study of the iconographies of the sacraments on baptismal fonts, Nichols explains that until 1450 there was a shared international convention for depicting the sacraments. After then, however, English fonts focus on the “key ritual action of each sacrament” in a manner that “remains truer to scholastic interpretation of ‘matter’ than do typical vernacular explications or sacrament representations in other media.” The representations are, for example, highly didactic, with elements of script appearing on books shown in sculpture. Made at great expense, the eighth panel of the octagonal bowls of these fonts usually depicted the Mass, a crucifixion scene, or an image of the elevation of the host.

Criticisms of Nichols’ study focus on the fact that there is a gap in date between the surviving records of heresy investigations in the diocese of Norwich (1428-1431) and the commissioning of seven sacrament fonts in the region.²⁰ The earliest of these fonts was made c.1450, with the majority being constructed in the 1470s. It is in this area that I hope my study offers a fresh insight about the impact that fears of heresy had on the art and architecture of late medieval England. The prevalence of a perceived threat, even its very existence, does not need to be proven for people to be afraid of it and to take material action against it. In bifurcating religious belief into groups of ‘orthodox’ and ‘heretic’, without defining what membership of those groups entails, Nichols and her critics seek statistics for ‘active heretics.’ A more fruitful question might be to ask how actively the spread of heresy was feared.

The integration of heretics within their communities may well have made the authorities more concerned about the threat they posed. The example of a suspected local Lollard parish priest illustrates the scant evidence that was required to arouse suspicion. On 2nd March 1429, Robert Berte, a priest in Bury St Edmunds, was investigated for Lollardy by the Bishop of Norwich.²¹ Berte’s position meant that an accusation of heresy was particularly dangerous for him. His profession gave him the opportunity to reach a large audience who were primed to trust his words. Priests were more likely to represent a threat in the eyes of the authorities as their training in oration and literacy gave them the skills to lead and disseminate heresy.

By the time Berte was questioned, four other East Anglian priests – Williams Sawtrey, White, and Caley, and Hugh Pye – had been burnt for spreading heresy in the Norwich diocese. The evidence for Berte’s heresy was vague. The record states he was a priest: “marked by heretical depravity.” He was accused of preaching that honour should not be given to images.²² He denied having “secret communications with famous heretics”, including Sir John Poleyn, but did admit to one meeting in his chambers.

The only specific evidence used against Berte was that he was in possession of a book, the heretical nature of which he claimed not to know. During the investigation, Berte’s name was mentioned in connection with a scribe called Robert Dykkes, who was named as being “vehemently suspected” of heresy by Bishop Alnwick on 14th December, 1428. Dykkes, also from Bury St Edmunds, had apparently written Berte’s heretical book.²³ Berte admitted to lending the book to a friar from Sudbury called Nicholas, who copied it for a knight named Sir Richard Boteler, who sold it on to someone living near Higham, all in the county of Suffolk. Like many other defendants, Berte denied the charge of heresy.

In July 1431, King Henry VI wrote to the alderman and bailiffs of Bury St Edmunds, and separately to the abbot, warning them of reports he was receiving “day to day” about the spread of Lollardy. The king charged the recipients of the letter to: “withstande, mightily chastise, and subdue ye dampnable malice and enterprise of goddis said traito’s.” The town authorities were urged to examine the populace: “we wol & charge yow, yat yee enquire, considere, and take good hede, fro tyme to tyme... such as eny mate of ille suspicion may reasonably be felt ynne, and yat ye areste, search, & examine hem in ye straitest wise.”²⁴ In short, there was clearly sufficient concern among secular and religious authorities in the wider region to merit an artistic response, in addition to the more obvious punitive legal actions that were taken.

Since 2015, when angel roof sculptures first received scholarly attention as an oeuvre, there has been an increase in the use of the term “angel roof” to describe church roofs and ceilings where angels feature as the predominant figurative imagery. The term was not used in the medieval period, and no equivalent term is used to define similar roof carvings in European church roofs. There is, for example, a small corpus of parish churches in Brittany with sculptures of angels (and other figures) in their roofs.²⁵ These sculptures were made in the sixteenth century. Sophie Duhem has treated these figures as elements of architectural sculpture. This approach seems fruitful. The label “angel roof” belies the fact that, in East

¹⁸ Margaret Aston, “The Use of Images,” in *Gothic Art for England: 1400-1547*, ed. Richard Marks and Paul Williamson (London: V&A Publications, 2003). 69.

¹⁹ Ann Eljenholm Nichols, *Seeable signs: the iconography of the seven sacraments, 1350-1544* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1994).

²⁰ Veronica Sekules, “Seeable Signs: The Iconography of the Seven Sacraments, 1350-1544 by Ann Nichols,” *Speculum* 71, no. 4 (1996). 991-993.

²¹ Norman Tanner, *Heresy Trials in the Diocese of Norwich: 1428-1431* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1977). 98.

²² Tanner, *Heresy Trials in the Diocese of Norwich: 1428-1431*. 99.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ *Archaeologia, or Miscellaneous Tracts Relating to Antiquity*, vol. xxiii (London: Society of Antiquaries, 1831). 340-342.

²⁵ See, for example, the small corpus of Breton churches, mainly from the sixteenth century, the roofs of which have oversized carvings on the wall-plates, hammerbeams and kingpost ends, discussed in: Sophie Duhem, *Les sablières sculptées de Bretagne* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 1997). See also: Claire Arlaux, *Trésors cachés des sablières de Bretagne* (Saint-Remy-de-Provence: Editions Equinoxe, 2007).

Anglia, other sculpted figures often appear with angels as part of the overall schemes of decoration in church roofs. Images of angels and devils alternate on the rafters, for example, in the roof of the church of saints Peter and Paul at Salle, Norfolk.²⁶ In addition, the term “angel roof” is occasionally applied to describe angelic imagery anywhere in a building’s upper reaches, potentially encouraging a lack of precision that could lead to conflating distinct structural elements, such as roof and ceiling.²⁷

The earliest use of the term that I have found appears in an issue of *The Photographic News* magazine (1902).²⁸ Dorothy L. Sayers employs the term twice in novels written in the 1920s and 1930s.²⁹ Lynn Courtenay’s 1984 article, *The Westminster Hall Roof and its 14th-Century Sources* appears to have introduced the term to architectural history.³⁰ Westminster Hall is significant for having the earliest hammerbeam roof carved with large angel sculptures in England. Courtenay traces antecedents for the structure of the roof of Westminster Hall, arguing that roofs of the chapel at New College, Oxford, and the great hall at Windsor castle were the principal prototypes.³¹ In concert with her structural analysis of the two major truss types married at Westminster, the hammerbeam and the arch-brace-and-collar, Courtenay examines the “decorative potentialities” of the hammerbeam roof. Courtenay explains that Westminster Hall’s roof was the culmination of three decades of experimentation in designing visually arresting open timber roofs as economical alternatives to timber vaulting and panelled ceilings.³² Although the iconography of the prominent angel sculptures is not discussed, by fusing structure and decoration at Westminster and applying the label of ‘angel roof’ to the entire entity, Courtenay set the tone for twenty-first-century scholarship.³³

Michael Rimmer’s book, *The Angel Roofs of East Anglia* (2015) has been instrumental in popularising the concept of a roof type defined by architectural sculpture.³⁴ Rimmer’s book is the first survey of medieval wooden roofs carved with angels. Rimmer appears to classify an angel roof as a structural type in its own right, which he discusses in parallel to

hammerbeam construction technology.³⁵ Although Michael Rimmer has dismissed the idea that angel roofs may have been built in response to Lollard non-conformity, this possibility merits further exploration.

Apart from Rimmer’s book, the only other study dedicated to the genre is a PhD thesis by Sarah Cassell. The title of Cassell’s thesis, *Structure and Image in Late Medieval East Anglian Angel Roofs*, encapsulates the welding of architectural technology and architectural sculpture that is implied by the term. It has been assumed that these sculptures are a uniquely English phenomenon, and Cassell highlights the lack of comparison with angelic imagery on the Continent.³⁶ Although further investigation is required to determine the original prevalence of paint schemes, several of the angel sculptures in Breton church roofs are brightly coloured.³⁷ The same cannot be said of many medieval angel sculptures in the roofs of English parish churches today.

3. Were medieval angel roof sculptures typically painted?

When entering a late-medieval church in England today, it is easy to feel a false sense of connection with the past. Before they were whitewashed in the waves of iconoclasm that followed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, attending a service in a parish church would have been a very different experience. The majority of surviving structures are like empty caskets, the interiors of which were once filled with stunning arrays of colourful statues, relics, and wall paintings. These rich displays were lit by flickering ceremonial candles and experienced as part of multimedia rituals that invoked sights, sounds, smells, and tastes in spectacles that were designed to create a sense of awe. Churches were festooned with images, and considerable resources were committed to creating and maintaining these exciting atmospheres.³⁸ Pageantry at the parish level was structured throughout the year around a full calendar of feast days. Church buildings were often lively places, in which communities were brought together with diverse events. There fundraising drives with liquid refreshment known as “church ales”, flower garlands were made, theatrical performances were held, and secular meetings were conducted within the walls of these buildings.³⁹

²⁶ Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Norfolk: Norwich and North-East*. 654.

²⁷ Cassell, “Structure and Image in Late Medieval East Anglian Angel Roofs.” 3.

²⁸ W. M. Dodson, “Architecture: Unusual Subjects,” *The Photographic News* XLVI (1903). 21.

²⁹ Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Nine Tailors* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2016). 56. See also: Dorothy L. Sayers, *Whose Body?* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1924). 80.

³⁰ Courtenay, “The Westminster Hall Roof and Its 14th-Century Sources.” 295-309.

³¹ Courtenay, “The Westminster Hall Roof and Its 14th-Century Sources.” 295.

³² Courtenay, “The Westminster Hall Roof and Its 14th-Century Sources.” 309.

³³ Until 2015, most scholars did not employ the term “angel roof”. See: John Smith, “Medieval Roofs: A Classification,” *Archaeological Journal* 115 (1958). Birkin Haward, *Suffolk Medieval Church Roof Carvings: An Exploratory Photographic Survey with Notes* (Ipswich: Suffolk Institute of Archaeology and History, 1993). Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Norfolk: Norwich and North-East* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1997). 429.

³⁴ Michael Rimmer, *The Angel Roofs of East Anglia*.

³⁵ “The angel roof is one of the most impressive and complex examples of this skill (carpentry). The hammer beam roof is another. In East Anglia, the two structures often combine, but rarely anywhere else in the country.” The parentheses are mine. Rimmer, *The Angel Roofs of East Anglia*. 1.

³⁶ Cassell, “Structure and Image in Late Medieval East Anglian Angel Roofs.” 3.

³⁷ Duhem, *Les sablières sculptées de Bretagne*. See also: Coulson, “Bind Sticks and Dead Stones: Iconoclasm and Religious Art and Architecture in England, c.1382-1500.” 101-102; 245-250.

³⁸ Charles Cox, *Churchwardens’ Accounts From the Fourteenth Century to the Close of the Seventeenth Century* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1913). Simon Cotton, *Building the late medieval Suffolk parish church* (Needham Market: Gipping Press, 2019).

³⁹ *Walberswick Churchwardens’ Accounts, AD 1450-1499*, ed. R.W.M Lewis (London: Headley Bros, 1947). 6. William Holland, *Craftfield Parish Papers: A transcript of the accounts of the parish, from AD1490 to AD 1642* (London: Jarrold and Sons, 1895). 21. Cox, *Churchwardens’ Accounts From the Fourteenth Century to the Close of the Seventeenth Century*. 2.

Most parish churches were filled with a riot of colour. Statues that appeared closer to ground level in churches were typically painted.⁴⁰ Gilding was also frequently applied to sculptures. For example, a large automaton in the shape of an angel, made c.1400 to descend from the nave of Norwich Cathedral and disburse incense over the congregation below, was brightened annually with fresh silver foil in the early part of the fifteenth century.⁴¹ When considered in their wider contemporary technicolour contexts, and given their prominence and scale, it would be surprising if most East Anglian parish church roof sculptures were never decorated with any paint or gilding in the late medieval period.

Today, however, most sculptures of angels in the roofs of East Anglian parish churches are devoid of colour. We have no firm evidence to prove how many of these sculptural programmes were painted when they were first constructed. Michael Rimmer maintains that very few angel roof sculptures were painted in the fifteenth century. He argues that the apparent lack of original paint traces in sculptures that today present as plain indicates that such examples were probably never painted.⁴² I argue that we lack sufficient evidence to support such a deduction.

The inaccessible positions of these sculptures has limited the number of close observations, let alone chemical analyses of any surface traces, to a small number of studies.⁴³ Tiny residues of paint may exist that are impossible to spot in gloomy settings, even with a powerful zoom lens. Many church roofs were restored in the nineteenth century, and it is possible that in some cases overzealous cleaning and varnishing may have accompanied repairs to damaged wood. Such physical interventions could explain the apparent uniformity with which colour may have vanished from church roof sculptures.

4. The Significance of Angels in Late Medieval East Anglia

While images of angels could appear in a wide variety of locations within a parish church, when they appeared above the congregation, they transformed the building's canopy into a symbolic representation of the heavens.⁴⁴ The concept of a hierarchy of angels, made up of nine orders or spheres, was

first put into writing by Dionysius the Areopagite in *De Coelesti Hierarchia* in the fifth century.⁴⁵ By the fifteenth century, the pseudo-Dionysian system of Gregory the Great was the accepted model for depicting the orders of angels in England.⁴⁶ The highest sphere included the following types of angels, in descending order: Seraphim, Cherubim, and Thrones. The members of the middle sphere were called Dominions, Virtues, and Powers, while the lowest sphere was made up of Principalities, Archangels, and Angels.⁴⁷ Despite the fact that the vast majority of medieval religious imagery was destroyed in later waves of iconoclasm, twenty separate partial or complete depictions of the nine orders of angels have been identified in a variety of media in Norfolk alone.⁴⁸ This rate of survival suggests that such imagery likely appeared widely in fifteenth-century England.

Dominican friar Thomas Aquinas was the most influential angelologist of the middle ages. As perhaps the most prominent Dominican saint after Dominic himself, Aquinas provided powerful inspiration for the many Blackfriars of England. In 1395, for example, Roger Dymmok, a Dominican author, cites Aquinas as his main authority to counter the Lollard manifesto of the same year in a manuscript written for Richard II.⁴⁹ By the sixteenth century, Aquinas had earned the appellation "Doctor Angelicus" because of the theories of angels expounded in his magnum opus, the *Summa Theologica*.

In question fifty of the *Summa*, Aquinas builds on a series of arguments made earlier in the text to explain the corporeality of angels.⁵⁰ For Aquinas, angels were neither corporeal, nor material beings. The question of how we might be able to sense the insensible, purely intellectual 'spirit' of angels was keenly attended to by Aquinas. Despite their immateriality, Aquinas believed that to be beheld by the human senses, angels, as purely spiritual subjects, had to become matter to be perceived.⁵¹ To be sensed by humankind, angels had to assume bodies, which,

238, & 259. Alexandra Johnston, "An Introduction to Medieval English Theatre," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, ed. Richard Beadle and Alan Fletcher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). Edgar Schell, *Strangers and Pilgrims: From the Castle of Perseverance to King Lear* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983). Stephen Friar, *A Companion to the English Parish Church* (Stroud: A. Sutton, 1994). Zachary Stewart, "One and Many: Parish Church Planning in Late Medieval England," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 79, no. 3 (2020).

⁴⁰ *Paint and piety: collected essays on Medieval painting and polychrome sculpture*, ed. Kaja Kollandsrud (London: Archetype Publications Ltd, 2014).

⁴¹ *The Victoria history of the county of Norfolk II vols.*, vol. II, ed. William Page (London: Victoria County History, 1906). 322.

⁴² Michael Rimmer, *The Angel Roofs of East Anglia*. 17.

⁴³ A. Lamb, *St. Agnes Church, Cawston: Hammerbeam Roof Condition Report & Assessment*, (Ditton Priors, 2019), 38. Catherine Hassall, *Paint Analysis, St Nicholas Chapel, King's Lynn, Report W270* (Kingham: The Perry Lithgow Partnership, 2004). 8.

⁴⁴ Clifford Davidson, *The Iconography of Heaven* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1994). 7.

⁴⁵ Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, Trans. & ed., Editors of the Shrine of Wisdom, *The Celestial Hierarchies of Dionysius the Areopagite*, (Surrey, 2004).

⁴⁶ Ann Nichols, *The Early Art of Norfolk (Early Drama, Art, and Music Reference): A Subject List of Extant and Lost Art Including Items Relevant to Early Drama* (2002). 31-33.

⁴⁷ T. Aquinas, Translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, *Summa Theologica*, (London, 1952). See also: Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, Trans. & ed., Editors of the Shrine of Wisdom, *The Celestial Hierarchies of Dionysius the Areopagite*, (Surrey, 2004).

⁴⁸ The Tate estimates that over 90% of public religious art was destroyed during and after the reformation. See: Boldrick, *Art Under Attack: Histories of British Iconoclasm*. For a list of surviving depictions of angel order in Norfolk see: Nichols, *The Early Art of Norfolk (Early Drama, Art, and Music Reference): A Subject List of Extant and Lost Art Including Items Relevant to Early Drama*. 31-33.

⁴⁹ Cambridge Trinity Hall MS17 *Liber Contra XII Errores et Hereses Lollardorum*, Apart from the manuscript itself, see also: A. Hudson, *The Premature Reformation*, (Oxford, 1988), 49. See also: F. Somerset, *Clerical Discourse and Lay Audience in Late Medieval England*, (Cambridge, 1998), 107.

⁵⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London, 1952). 269

⁵¹ "Angelic substances... are above our intellect; and hence our intellect cannot attain to apprehend them, as they are in themselves, but by its own mode, according as it apprehends composite things; and in this way also it apprehends God." Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*. 271

"were beheld by bodily vision, whereby the object seen exists outside the person beholding it, and can accordingly be seen by all."⁵² For Aquinas, vision was the primary sense through which angels had the potential to be beheld by humankind.

Every angelic appearance was a God-made miracle rendered momentarily in matter. Angels are rarely mentioned in the Bible, with physical descriptions being fewer still. Aquinas surmised that their omission from Genesis was evidence of the risk of idol worship that angels imposed on the beholder.⁵³ For medieval patrons and artists, materialising immaterial angels on a monumental, three-dimensional scale posed a challenge. The translation of textual sources into physical representations might risk inciting idolatry in impressionable beholders. This begs the question: what constitutes a 'life-like' appearance for an angel? Given the fleeting, miraculous nature of any angelic encounter, how could it ever be considered appropriate to represent these immaterial creatures as permanent, sometimes human-sized, fixtures in an architectural setting that offered an earthly vision of heaven? Indeed, this was something about which Wycliffe and the Lollards voiced serious concerns.

When it came to art, Wycliffe was not an abolitionist.⁵⁴ He stated that images could be either useful as tools for illiterate laypeople, or dangerous when inappropriate types of devotion were performed before them, so that a viewer revered the man-made object rather than the thing it represented. Images of angels, however, were specifically mentioned as having a high-risk of leading people astray. In 1376, Wycliffe wrote of his concern about creating artistic "likenesses, by which not only laymen but ecclesiastical superiors err in faith, thinking... angels to be corporeal."⁵⁵ Representing angels in the round, and usually roughly the same size as a large human, with a high degree of naturalism, particularly in terms of physiognomy, hairstyles and clothing, increased a viewer's potential to relate to the anthropomorphic features of these carvings. In East Anglia, the placement of angel sculptures in roofs creates the impression that the figures are in flight – particularly when the angels are carved into hammerbeams and jut out into open space above the nave. Large, outspread wings add to this effect and imbue the sculptures with a sense of dynamism and movement. The addition of vibrant polychromy would have made roof angels even more eye-catching and allowed for greater individuality among a given group of figures. These factors meant that angel roof sculpture had particularly high potential to cause laymen and their ecclesiastical counterparts to construe that there were indeed corporeal beings above them.

When Margery Baxter was investigated for heresy in April 1429, a witness called Johanna Clifland repeated a conversation that she had had with Margery about fallen angels inhabiting church statues. The

text of Alnwick's heresy investigation reads: "Margery also said to this witness that the people honour the devils who fell from heaven with Lucifer, which devils, after they had fallen to earth, entered into images standing in churches, and they continued to live and still live latent in them in order that people worshipping them in this way commit idolatry."⁵⁶

Margery was from Martham in Norfolk. The roof of her parish church, St Mary's, is carved with angels. This roof was probably built c.1440-1450.⁵⁷ We do not know if the mid fifteenth-century roof replaced an earlier truss that was also carved with angels at the time of Margery's trial in 1429. Angels also appear prominently in a restored, incomplete, c.1450 stained-glass depiction of the nine orders of angels in a large window at the east end of the south aisle. The orders surround an image of St Michael weighing souls while devils attempt to tip the balance.⁵⁸ Again, we do not know whether the same subject appeared in the 1420s, but a similar depiction of the nine orders survives in glass at Salle, Norfolk, made 1436-1441. This composition, also incomplete, includes fallen angels.

It is possible that Margery's remarks could have been prompted by a similar image of a fallen angel in her church. In any case, Wycliffe's concern about people thinking that angel sculptures were corporeal was taken a step further by Margery. She believed that such images were inherently dangerous because they were inhabited by a type of animate soul with evil intent. The laity were regularly reminded of the importance of angels in Christian life. Taking place annually on 29th September, the feast of St Michael and all angels (Michaelmas) was an important date in the liturgical year. Coinciding with harvest time, this was a day of celebration that reminded the laity of the importance of angels as defenders of the faith, with particular note paid to the efforts of the archangel in defeating the devil in battle.⁵⁹

5. The Importance of Colour at St Agnes Church

St Agnes Church is evidence of the great wealth enjoyed by eastern counties' landowners in the later middle ages. At the west end, the tower is an imposing construction, and the finely cut ashlar facing would have required costly transportation, probably from France.⁶⁰ To the east of the tower lies a three aisled nave with transepts. On the north side there is a chancel, chapel, and vestry, while to the south there

⁵² Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*. 276

⁵³ T. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 315

⁵⁴ John Wycliffe, *Tractatus de mandatis divinis*, ed. Johann Loserth (London: C. K. Paul & co., 1922). 156. Cited in: Margaret Aston, "Lollards and Images," in *England's Iconoclasts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988). 98.

⁵⁵ John Wycliffe, *Tractatus de Mandatis Divinis*, ed. J. Loserth, and F. Matthew, (Wyclif society, London: 1922), 152 & 156. Wycliffe's *Treatise on the Decalogue* was written in 1375-1376.

⁵⁶ Tanner, *Heresy Trials in the Diocese of Norwich: 1428-1431*. 49.

⁵⁷ The hammerbeam roof was restored between 1855-1861 by an architect called Philip Boyce. Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Norfolk: Norwich and North-East*. 608.

⁵⁸ In the same period, c.1450, the church possessed an altar cloth (no longer extant), made from several clerical vestments, which was embroidered with angels, including a six-winged figure. Nichols, *The Early Art of Norfolk (Early Drama, Art, and Music Reference): A Subject List of Extant and Lost Art Including Items Relevant to Early Drama*. 35.

⁵⁹ John Lydgate, *The Minor Poems of John Lydgate*, ed. Henry MacCracken (Berlin: Early English Text Society, 1911). 133. Original: MS Laud 683, fol. 24.

⁶⁰ H. Richmond, *Conservation Report: Heritage Lottery Fund Grant: The Church of St. Agnes, Cawston, Norfolk*, (Heritage Lottery Fund, 2019), 6

is a porch. The roof over the central aisle of the nave is of the single hammerbeam type, with arch braces.

The chancel is covered by a much simpler roof with miniature hammerbeams, while the north transept has a similarly plain hammerbeam structure. The south transept is topped with a vibrant polychromed arch-braced structure. The central nave is crowned with 48 angels, arranged in two registers. In addition to the angels, the nave roof also contains three other sculpted figures at the East end. The Virgin stands gesturing upwards, St Agnes is shown holding a palm leaf and cradling a small lamb, and St John the Evangelist appears opposite St Agnes, holding a book. The figures of Saints Agnes and John have been identified as nineteenth century works.⁶¹ We do not know whether these saints replaced two more angels, or whether the nineteenth-century sculptures are replacements for fifteenth-century sculptures of Agnes and John.

A range of dates have been suggested for the roof sculptures at St Agnes. Pevsner suggests a date of c.1460 based on stylistic evidence.⁶² An architectural report of 2019 describes how the church was subject to four main phases of development between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, arguing that the roof was likely completed before 1460.⁶³ The earliest part of the building is the chancel, the tower was rebuilt after a storm in 1412, and the nave roof was subsequently raised to accommodate the addition of a clerestory in the intervening decades of the early fifteenth century.⁶⁴ As a result of this architectural evidence, Michael Rimmer suggests the roof dates to between 1450 and 1480.⁶⁵ In 1460, a John Barker bequeathed 10 marks towards the construction of the rood loft.⁶⁶ I favour a date of c.1460 as a terminus ante quem for the construction of the roof, given that it would have been sheltering the expensive screen, construction of which likely started shortly after John Barker's donation.

The nave roof was restored c.1912, as a result of a survey of 1875 and an appeal for funds in 1909.⁶⁷ At this time, some of the angels' wings, or parts of their wings, were repaired or replaced. The restorers did not repaint the sculptures, instead leaving new wood bare and the original paint in faded condition. This forward-thinking approach allows us to imagine for ourselves how eye-catching the original colour scheme would have been in its original intensity. A small number of figures themselves are also later replacements, marked out by fixings which differ from the original iron screws and wooden pegs.⁶⁸ The part-restored wings are easy to discern, given the

stark difference in colour between original and later carvings, with the nineteenth-century work being unpainted. Aside from these areas, the roof retains a remarkable amount of original fifteenth-century polychromy, with lead white, yellow ochre, malachite, and carbon black all having been detected.⁶⁹

I believe these sculptures were intended to reinforce the concept of a heavenly hierarchy in response to anxieties engendered by Lollard rejections of the established order of the Church. On 26th February, William Sawtre, a Norfolk priest, was convicted and became the first heretic to be burnt at the stake in England under King Henry IV's new anti-heresy law: *De Haeretico Comburendo*.⁷⁰ The fifth of eight heresy charges that Thomas Arundel, the Archbishop of Canterbury, levelled against William Sawtre was that he would: "rather worship man than any angel of God."⁷¹ Sawtre's statement placed humanity on a higher spiritual plane than angels, upending the established hierarchy of the universe, headed by God surrounded by angels, with humans inhabiting the earthly world below. While there is significant iconographic variation across different sites, sculptures of angels in East Anglian church roofs conveyed a universal message of angelic presence at Mass, which served to reassert Catholic doctrine.

Since belief in angelic presence at Mass was a conventional part of established doctrine, we cannot be certain that the presence of angel sculptures in parish churches responds exclusively to concerns about the threat of Lollard's appeal to the laity. Any artistic trend may have multiple drivers and influences. If Sawtre's words themselves were not a direct catalyst for a new trend of depicting three-dimensional angels in roofs, Sawtre's beliefs were certainly the tip of a groundswell of regional nonconformist thought that had a wider impact on anxieties about the spread of heresy.

The Lollards rejected the sacraments, reserving special ire for the most significant rite: the Eucharist. In Bishop William Alnwick's heresy investigations in the diocese of Norwich (1428-1431), recorded in Westminster Diocesan Archives MS B.2., beliefs concerning the sacraments were the most frequently noted of all charges. Out of a total of 60 named defendants, 45 cases mention specific heretical beliefs as opposed to making general accusations of heresy. Of these beliefs, the Eucharist is mentioned in 35 cases. Rejection of religious images is mentioned even more frequently, in a total of 37 cases.⁷²

Sawtre's statement against worshipping angels is consistent with the Lollard conviction that humans are the only authentic images of God, and that humanity's vital needs should have been provided for before resources were frittered away on making and honouring "dead images" of God's spiritual

⁶¹ A. Lamb, *St. Agnes Church, Cawston: Hammerbeam Roof Condition Report & Assessment*, (Ditton Priors, 2019), 7

⁶² N. Pevsner & B. Wilson, *The Buildings of England: Norfolk 1: Norwich and North-East* (London, 2002), 429.

⁶³ Hugh Richmond, *The Church of St. Agnes, Cawston, Norfolk: Conservation Report for Heritage Lottery Fund* (Norwich, 2017), 8.

⁶⁴ Richmond, *The Church of St. Agnes, Cawston, Norfolk: Conservation Report for Heritage Lottery Fund*, 3.

⁶⁵ Rimmer, *The Angel Roofs of East Anglia*, 32.

⁶⁶ Francis Blomefield, *An Essay Towards A Topographical History of the County of Norfolk*, vol. VI (London: W Miller, 1807), 261.

⁶⁷ Alan Lamb, *St. Agnes Church, Cawston: Hammerbeam Roof Condition Report & Assessment* (Ditton Priors, 2019), 40-42.

⁶⁸ Lamb, *St. Agnes Church, Cawston: Hammerbeam Roof Condition Report & Assessment*, 4.

⁶⁹ Lamb, *St. Agnes Church, Cawston: Hammerbeam Roof Condition Report & Assessment*, 5.

⁷⁰ Lamb, *St. Agnes Church, Cawston: Hammerbeam Roof Condition Report & Assessment*, 38.

⁷¹ *Statutes of the Realm*, ix vols., vol. ii, ed. J. Raithby and A. Luders (London, 1766-1826), 125-128.

⁷² *Concilia Magnae Britanniae et Hiberniae, A Synodo Verolamensi A.D. CCCXVI ad Londinensem A.D. [MDCCXVII]. Accedunt constitutiones et alia ad historiam Ecclesiae Anglicanae spectantia.*, iii, 254-263. Ex. Reg Aurdell, II, fol. 178.

⁷³ Tanner, *Heresy Trials in the Diocese of Norwich: 1428-1431*, 10.



Fig. 2. Lower register of angels with shields on wall plate, St Agnes Church; carved oak; (c.1460); Cawston, Norfolk. Source: Author.

attendants. As Sawtrey put it: “homo est ejusdem naturae cum humanitate christi, non sic angelus beatus.”⁷³ To operate otherwise, according to an unnamed contemporary Lollard author, contravened the second commandment: “And so who that trusteth on them worshipping them (images) with worship that only pertaineth to God he maketh to him false and alien gods and breaketh the commandment of God.”⁷⁴

While Sawtrey does not explicitly denounce angelic images, his pronouncement about angels follows a statement that he would prefer to worship saints’ bodies than the cross because he had a material representation of the cross before him. When considering his statements together, we can deduce that Sawtrey was less comfortable revering a material representation than an abstract spiritual entity. Indeed, Sawtrey argued that a temporal king was more deserving of devotion than a “wooden cross.” The explicit mention of the cross’s material emphasizes that it is a temporal object made of earthly substance. This phraseology connects Sawtrey to more extreme Wycliffite statements that draw attention to a devotional object’s earthly materials to reduce their sanctity. To dress up a “dead stick” in precious materials was, for example, a wasteful deceit, designed to hide the authentic plainness of the underlying object.⁷⁵ If a material representation of the Cross was

unworthy of Sawtrey’s adoration, then sculptures of angels, especially if they were lavishly made, would also be distasteful to him and other local Lollards who shared his beliefs.

For Sawtrey and other East Anglian Lollards, materiality also mattered when it came to the sacrament of Mass. Sawtrey rejected the established doctrine of transubstantiation, believing that the substance of bread remained and was simultaneously present with Christ’s body during the consecration of the Host.⁷⁶

Others, like Hawise Moone from Loddon, Norfolk, went further, denying that any miracle took place at all at Mass, saying: “no prest hath poar to make Cristis veri body at messe.” The sacraments even appear to have become something of a regional joke, with heretics describing them using the pun: “shakelments.”⁷⁷ Margery Baxter went so far as to liken the consecrated bread to excrement, apparently saying: “if every sacrament is God and the true body of Christ, there are numerous gods, because a thousand and more priests make a thousand such gods and afterwards eat those gods and having eaten them discharge them through their posteriors into foul smelling privies, where you can find plenty such gods if you wish to look.”⁷⁸

Returning to St Agnes, the angels in the roof are arranged in two registers. In the upper register, there are six standing angels of approximately six feet in height at each hammerpost on north and south sides of the roof, making a total of twelve angels. These angels have two pairs of wings, indicating that they represent a higher order of angel – Seraphim, Cherubim, or Thrones (figure 2). This sphere of angels is most

⁷³ Translation: “Man is of the same nature with the humanity of Christ, not so the blessed angel.” *Concilia Magnae Britanniae et Hiberniae, A Synodo Verolamiensi A.D. CCCXLVI ad Londonensem A.D. [MDCCXVII]. Accedunt constitutiones et alia ad historiam Ecclesiae Anglicanae spectantia.* iii. 255.

⁷⁴ BL MS Harley 2398 fol. 84r. Written c.1382-1400.

⁷⁵ A work of the last two decades of the fourteenth century, attributed to Wycliffe in the 19th century, chastizes: “riche men clothen dede stockis & stonys with precious clothis, with gold & silver & perlis & gaynesse to the world, & suffren pore men goo sore a cold & at moche meschefe.” Matthew, *The English Works of Wycliffe, Hitherto Unpublished.* 210.

⁷⁶ Tanner, *Heresy Trials in the Diocese of Norwich: 1428-1431.* 10.

⁷⁷ Tanner, *Heresy Trials in the Diocese of Norwich: 1428-1431.* 81, 141, 147.

⁷⁸ Tanner, *Heresy Trials in the Diocese of Norwich: 1428-1431.* 45.

closely associated with the justice and authority of God; his judges, and bringers of the apocalypse.

In the lower order, three angels appear between each hammerbeam. These angels have one pair of wings, signifying a lower order of angel. The lowest sphere of angels functioned as guides, messengers, and protectors, and had the most to do with the terrestrial beings below. The lower register of angels at Cawston is therefore slightly more accessible, having more interaction with the earthly world than the unknowable cherubim who were several degrees further removed both in terms of hierarchy and in their distance from worshipers. The position of the lowest orders of angels at the base of the roof, offers a physical reminder that these angels are members of God's kingdom, rather than the earthly domain; there is no possibility of haptic interaction with the congregation below.

Twenty-seven of the angels in the lower register on the wall plates hold unornamented shields. This might suggest that these figures represent an order from the middle sphere of angels. The shields could be symbols of the more remote, soldierly orders that were believed to maintain order in the cosmos. It is unclear whether these shields would once have been painted with family crests, possibly of local donors, although this seems very unlikely given that the original polychromy has survived so well in the upper register. Two angels do hold shields carved with heraldry, although these are identified as nineteenth century replacements by their screw fixings. Two further demi angels date from the nineteenth century. These later carvings hold a stringed citole and a harp.

The standing angels are painted with a white ground, over which we see red chevrons denoting feathers. All over the body of the angels, we see green-gold circles, which imitate the eyes of peacock feathers. This motif of feathers and eyes also appears on the cherubim shown on the rood screen at Barton Turf, Norfolk (figure 3).

I speculate that the angels at St Agnes were intended to be understood as angels of judgement. I suggest that the red, green-gold, and white paint may interpret the cherubim of Ezekiel's visions of Doomsday. The angelic vision in Ezekiel 10 reads, "As for the likeness of the living creatures... this was the vision running to and fro in the midst of the living creatures, a bright fire, and lightning going forth from the fire."⁷⁹ Verse 18 continues, "and the whole body was full of eyes round about all the four." Golden circles appear all over the bodies of the angels on the hammer posts, illustrating the eyes described in Ezekiel, while the red chevron motifs denote the fire among the cherubim. Ezekiel's vision also describes the sound of these angels, "I heard the noise of their wings, like the noise of many waters, as it were the voice of the most high God: when they walked, it was like the voice of a multitude, like the noise of an army."⁸⁰ The colour scheme of the cherubim at Cawston, coupled with the sight of the outspread helicopter-like wings of these sculptures, would have brought to mind the awesome sounds described in this biblical passage.



Fig. 3. Panel showing "cherubim" from a rood screen depicting the nine orders of angels; painted oak; (c.1450); St Michael & All Angels Church, Barton Turf, Norfolk. Photo: Author.

There are extensive traces of a rood image in red and white paint on the wall between nave and chancel roofs, above the surviving fifteenth-century rood screen (figure 4). The angel sculptures in the roof were designed in dialogue with the rood image. The roof participates in an overall schema designed to provoke engagement of the senses in a carefully coordinated programme that was orchestrated to have the maximum impact on the bodies of worshipers to inspire awe and assert the parish church as the essential place to achieve salvation.

The rood screen is dated to c.1460 by Barker's bequest.⁸¹ Jacqueline Jung's insightful analysis of how choir screens articulate space informs my reading of the relationship between rood image and roof angels at St Agnes.⁸² The screen at St Agnes replicates on a smaller scale the same tangled web of unifying and separating effects that Jung eloquently describes in grander French edifices. Rather than separating the nave from the holy action taking place at the altar, the screen, with its engaging painted images, expounded on the wonders of salvation and offered enticing glimpses of the quire through open tracery. The screen denoted a liminal space which could be traversed

⁷⁹ Michael Tweedale. *The Holy Bible: Douay-Rheims Version*. (London, 2008). Ezekiel 10:13.

⁸⁰ Ibid. Verse 24.

⁸¹ N. Pevsner & B. Wilson, *The Buildings of England: Norfolk 1: Norwich and North-East*, (London, 2002), 66. See also: H. Richmond, *Conservation Report: Heritage Lottery Fund Grant: The Church of St. Agnes, Cawston, Norfolk*, (Heritage Lottery Fund, 2019), 8

⁸² J. Jung, "Beyond the Barrier: The Unifying Role of the Choir Screen in Gothic Churches", in, *Art Bulletin*, Vol. 82, (2000), 622-657



Fig. 4. Traces of rood image, east end of the central nave, St Agnes Church, Cawston, Norfolk; (fifteenth century). Photo: Author.

through a gate, offering the possibility, physically and spiritually, of moving closer to God. The north side of the screen depicts the full-length figures of, from left to right: St Agnes, St Helena, St Thomas, St John the Evangelist, St James, St Andrew, St Paul, and St Peter.⁸³ St Gregory, St Jerome, St Ambrose, and St Augustine appear on the central gates. The south side illustrates St James the Less, St Bartholomew, St Philip, St Jude, St Simon, St Matthew wearing spectacles, St Matthias, and the uncanonised John Schorn conjuring the devil into a boot. This composition has the four original doctors of the Church – spiritual exemplars and pillars of the ecclesiastical establishment – guiding the route to salvation, which is guarded overhead by the two highest choirs of angels, and from the sides by the saints.

Where the angels exert a downward, almost funnelling, spiritual force from above, the saints' potential for intercession draws the attention of those in the nave to look towards the East end. The location of the saints at ground level adds to a feeling of their relative spiritual accessibility. The saints are in such a grounded position that they might have provided the titillating possibility for a kneeling worshipper to reach out and touch their icon-like portraits. The microarchitecture which frames these paintings also stimulates the imagination, as it mimics the structure of the larger open tracery above. The illusion is that the portraits appear almost as figures in windows, who might really be present just behind the screen. Therefore, we might easily be able to picture images of correspondingly larger saints in the frame-like tracery of the upper open sections that rise above the portraits. The painted images attract the eye and ignite the mind to the possibilities of contemplative prayer. Wherever you stood in the church in relation to the rood screen, the sounds of music and chanted

prayers, the smell of incense, and the sight of angels above, would have connected you with the miracle taking place beyond the nave. In this way, the decoration of the church functioned to channel the senses most powerfully at the moment of highest liturgical drama and significance during Mass.

When activated by the sounds, smells and taste surrounding the ritual of the mass, the sight of angel roof sculpture made the terrifying wonder of God present in a fleeting moment, as described in Revelations.⁸⁴ While the two demi angels that hold musical instruments on the wall plates are nineteenth-century replacements, fifteenth-century angel musicians appear in stained glass. These depictions, which are roughly contemporary to the roof sculpture, survive in a conglomeration of reconfigured fragments in a single window situated in the nave of the church. It is not known what the original compositions were, or where the stained glass was sited within the church originally.

The glass has been dated stylistically to two periods. The first set was made when the church was built between c.1400 – 1430, and the later fragments were fabricated c.1460 – 1475, when the roof sculpture was carved.⁸⁵ The glass depicts angels holding stringed musical instruments including harps, lutes and psalteries. The angels' torsos are covered in feathers, in a manner reminiscent of the cherubim in the roof. Stylistically, the angels in glass are given a greater degree of individuality in comparison to the sculptures. The shapes of heads, noses, and the degree to which eyelids are shown open or closed are

⁸³ E. Strange, "The Rood Screen of Cawston Church", in *The Volume of the Walpole Society*, Vol. 2, (1912-1913), 81-87

⁸⁴ "And the smoke of the incense of the prayers of the saints ascended up before God from the hand of the angel... And the seven angels, who had the seven trumpets, prepared themselves to sound the trumpet." Revelations, chapter 8, verses 4 & 6. Michael Tweedale. *The Holy Bible: Douay-Rheims Version*. (London, 2008).

⁸⁵ A. Rose, "Angel Musicians in the Medieval Stained Glass of Norfolk Churches", in *Early Music*, Vol. 29, (2001), 189

varied, while the hairstyles in particular give the figures a great deal of personality.

While the roof of the nave conveyed a stern message relating to Judgement, the angels in glass offered worshipers lighter, more encouraging thoughts upon which to dwell. As the light waxed and waned with the unpredictable English weather, and as the sun's position moved with the hours of the day through surrounding trees, the angels in the glass would have been animated with a shimmering glow as dapples of coloured light flickered ethereally across the walls. All of which combined to create a dynamic and exciting space, where the worshipper was guided towards salvation by a coordinated programme of painting, monumental sculpture and architectural design.

6. Conclusion

By the 1460s, the angel roof sculptures at Cawston represent a diversification in design from earlier horizontally oriented hammerbeam sculptures, as seen for example at Westminster Hall, and at the churches of St Nicholas in Lynn and St Mary's in Bury St Edmunds. The large, colourful cherubim are freed from lying prone, standing poised on the edges of diving board-like beams from which it is easy to imagine them descending to the nave below. Supported by clearly visible rows of demi angels along the wall plates, the sculptural programme in the roof communicates a sense of structure and order. The polychromy indicates that the standing angels are cherubim of Judgement. While this roof design does not exhibit a didactic connection to the liturgy, its design may still, to some extent, have had the local Lollard heresy in mind.

Angel roof sculpture was not necessarily made with the intention of attracting Lollards back to the fold of their local parish church. The Lollards were opposed to wasteful artistic display, and doubling down on a commitment to the power of images by commissioning large three-dimensional sculptures of angels was not in any way an act of placation. As members of the dominant culture, the wealthy merchants and the clergy who patronised parish churches probably felt they did not need to pander to Lollard concerns. This is demonstrated by the punishments that were meted out to convicted heretics, which ranged from public humiliation and floggings to gruesome executions by fire. To appease Lollards might have been to show weakness and could possibly even have legitimised the position of the heretics. Instead, ostentatious displays of angels offered prominent reminders of the power of images, and the presence of these sculptures specifically rejected the key anti-sacramental tenets of the Lollard heresy.

The Church's very existence was being systematically questioned for the first time in England. With that context in mind, the new fashion for sculptural programmes of angels in East Anglian church roofs that begins after Sawtrey's execution can be seen as part of a shift towards public communal worship in the face of the Lollard challenge to established religion.⁸⁶ The fact that the

new ideas circulating among the laity had their basis, whether close or distant, in Wycliffe's academic writing no doubt troubled the Church more deeply than if they were dealing with more random patterns of nonconformity. The preponderance of anti-sacramentalism could have felt to Church authorities like the crystallisation of a coordinated Lollard doctrine. As a result, creating monumental angel sculptures that asserted the concept of angelic presence at the sacraments while simultaneously demonstrating the power of images would have been an effective way to ease anxieties in the dominant culture about the spread of heresy in the region.

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⁸⁶ Jeremy Catto, "Religious Change Under Henry V," in *Henry V: The Practice of Kingship*, ed. G. L. Harris (Oxford: Oxford

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