



## **Personal Piety or Priestly Persuasion: Evidence of Pilgrimage Bequests in the Wills of the Archdeaconry of Sudbury, 1439-1474**

By Matthew Champion, Heritage Consultant and Project Manager,  
MJC Associates

Despite the complex contemporary arguments surrounding the legitimacy of pilgrimage as a concept, it is clear that during the later Middle Ages popular pilgrimage was an accepted and acceptable part of the lay religious experience. Whilst serving a number of personal functions, from the highly spiritual search for enlightenment to the provision of "holy day" entertainment, the physical and religious act of pilgrimage has become the subject of an entire discipline of study. Drawing upon multiple sources of evidence, which include everything from the architectural and archaeological to the purely literary, such studies have led to the recognition of pilgrimage as a fascinating insight into the spiritual and religious beliefs of the age.<sup>1</sup>

However, despite the diversity of the sources, and the quantity of material available, one area of pilgrimage studies remains largely in the shadows. The ultimate objects of medieval pilgrimage, the saints, shrines and buildings that housed them, have been studied in depth by numerous scholars.<sup>2</sup> Likewise the account rolls and finances of individual shrines, ranging from the internationally famous sites such as Canterbury down to the localized and short-lived sites such as St Leonard's outside Norwich, have been examined and scrutinized in painstaking detail.<sup>3</sup> The routes of pilgrimage have been mapped, the logistics studied and even their souvenirs have been analyzed to such a degree that, alongside observations on artistic and stylistic content, we can now be certain of the metal composition itself and, in some cases, its likely source.<sup>4</sup>

However, when we consider the number of individuals, particularly from the lower orders, who actually undertook a pilgrimage at some point in their lives, we find that we actually know remarkably little about them. Whilst we can with some confidence record that 40,000 pilgrims passed through the gates of Munich on a single day in 1392, or that 142,000 arrived at

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<sup>1</sup> J. Sumption, *Pilgrimage: an image of medieval religion*, London (1975), D. Webb, *Pilgrimage in Medieval England*, Hambledon and London (2000), R. Marks, *Image and Devotion in Late Medieval England*, Sutton (2004).

<sup>2</sup> J. Crook, J., *English Medieval Shrines*, Boydell (2011).

<sup>3</sup> D. Webb, *Pilgrimage in Medieval England* (2000); M. R. V Heale, "Veneration and renovation at a small Norfolk priory: St Leonard's, Norwich in the later Middle Ages," *Historical Research* vol. 76, no. 194 (November 2003), pp. 431-49.

<sup>4</sup> B. Spencer, *Pilgrim Souvenirs and Secular Badges: Medieval finds from excavated London*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Boydell (2010), pp. 7-13.

Aachen on a single day in 1496, we know next to nothing about the pilgrims themselves.<sup>5</sup> The beliefs, hopes and motivations that inspired a large percentage of the late medieval population to undertake a pilgrimage are almost as much of a mystery to modern scholars as the exact geography of the world was to the medieval pilgrims who traversed it.

With regard to the individuals who undertook, or expressed the wish to undertake, a pilgrimage we have two key primary sources to draw upon. Putting aside analysis of the literary tradition, of which Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* is by far the best-known work, and the guidebook-like "itineraries" to the major shrines, the individual pilgrim's voice is found in both the wills of those who left bequests for pilgrimages to be undertaken and in those collections of miracles, most usually compiled by clerics, to support claims to sainthood. This last source, of which a good number survive, would appear on the surface to be an extremely useful source for historians of pilgrimage and social history alike. Many of these accounts give details of the individuals involved, their place of origin, occupation and occasionally an indication of social status.<sup>6</sup> However, although detailed analysis of these documents has been attempted, even down to a geographical analysis in some cases, the voice that is heard is not that of the pilgrims themselves, but that of the scribe who compiled the collection.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, attempts by clerics such as William Fitz Stephen to transpose the testimony given by witnesses to miracles into the first person are so artificial in their construction as to widen rather than narrow the gulf of understanding.<sup>8</sup>

The wills of the late Middle Ages, of which a very large number survive in one form or another, have long been regarded as true reflections of lay piety and an important source in the study of medieval pilgrimage. These post-mortem pilgrimages specified in these documents largely take two forms. Most commonly they appear as bequests that a pilgrimage should be undertaken, often to a specific site for a specified sum, for the sake of the health of their everlasting soul. Alternatively they appear, though far more rarely, as a final bequest to fulfill a vow of pilgrimage that was made during the testator's life but, for various reasons, were not fulfilled prior to the making of the will.<sup>9</sup> Although in both these cases the inclusion of a specific bequest regarding a post-mortem pilgrimage has been recognized as being both unusual and subject to external influence, these documents have remained one of the key forms of evidence regarding pilgrimage amongst the commonality. However, recent analysis of one corpus of surviving wills, those belonging to the Archdeacons of Sudbury in the mid- fifteenth century, would suggest that these documents were far more open to external influence than previously thought.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the demonstrable level of external influence exhibited by these documents

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<sup>5</sup> B. Spencer, *Salisbury and South Wiltshire Museum, Medieval Catalogue, Pt.2: Pilgrim Souvenirs and Secular Badges*, Salisbury and South Wiltshire Museums (1990), p.8.

<sup>6</sup> Webb, *Pilgrimage in Medieval England*, pp.181-82.

<sup>7</sup> H. Forrest, "The Miracle of Henry VI in Northamptonshire," *Northamptonshire Past and Present* (1971/2), pp. 363-65.

<sup>8</sup> J.C. Robertson (ed.), *Materials for the History of Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury*, Rolls Series (1881).

<sup>9</sup> Webb, *Pilgrimage in Medieval England*, p. 191.

<sup>10</sup> The wills of the archdeacons of Sudbury, 1439-74, have been published in two volumes by the Suffolk Records Society. P. Northeast (ed.), "Wills of the Archdeacons of Sudbury, 1439-74: Wills from the register 'Baldwyne,'"

makes their value as a direct source of information concerning intended pilgrimage amongst the commonality highly questionable.

The popularity of pilgrimage amongst all classes is well-attested during the late Middle Ages. The massive numbers of medieval pilgrims attending continental shrines such as Aachen and Munich, already mentioned. Although associated with particular festivals or offers of indulgence, which might make these figures atypical, popular shrines such as Wilsnack in northern Germany regularly received in excess of 100,000 pilgrims per annum which, for a town whose likely population was no more than 1000, was an impressive feat of logistics.<sup>11</sup> Similar popularity is shown at the major English shrines in the 15th century. Although exact numbers of pilgrims visiting the major shrines of St Thomas at Canterbury and Our Lady of Walsingham in Norfolk are harder to establish, the revenues produced by these shrines, derived largely from pilgrims' offerings, suggest that they continued to attract very large numbers of pilgrims, right up until the dissolution. Indeed, by the very end of the 15th century the shrine at Walsingham, and the relatively new shrine of Henry VI at Windsor, were both generating an income over seven times that generated by the pilgrims to Canterbury.<sup>12</sup>

It was not just the major shrines that continued to derive large parts of their income from pilgrims' donations. The chapel of St Leonard at Norwich was a small priory that acted as a cell of Norwich cathedral priory and, for such a small institution, is exceedingly well- documented.<sup>13</sup> Over 140 account rolls survive that record in the greatest detail its financial dealings for the two centuries prior to its dissolution in the 1530s. St Leonard's was situated only a short walk from the main priory, across the river Wensum on the edge of Thorpe Woods and outside the city itself. Although the site may well have acted as some form of retreat for the members of the mother house St Leonards was financially independent, albeit not exceedingly wealthy, for much of its existence.

The principal income of the priory was derived from offerings left before the images within the priory chapel. Although the priory contained several images, all of which are recorded as generating income from offerings and bequests, it was the image of St Leonard himself that generated the largest single sum. At the time the financial records for the priory begin, in the year 1348/9, the priory's income was recorded as being a little over £46, of which over £38 had been generated by the image of St Leonard alone. Although relatively modest in general terms, and given the priory's tiny endowment, this sum was enough to support an on-going building program that continued into the 15th century. Although the cult of St Leonard declined in the late 14th century, with income reaching a low point of less than £10 in 1425, it saw a revival in the 1430s, 40s and 50s that saw it rise to over £40 again - reaching a peak of £43 4d in 1454/5.

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pt. 1, *Suffolk Records Society* (2001) and P. Northeast and H. Falvey (eds.), "Wills of the Archdeaconry of Sudbury, 1439-74: Wills from the register 'Baldwyne,'" pt. 2, *Suffolk Records Society* (2010).

<sup>11</sup> B. Spencer, *Pilgrim Souvenirs and Secular Badges* (2010), p. 13.

<sup>12</sup> At the height of its popularity in 1220, the year the relics of St Thomas were translated into the choir, Canterbury received the massive sum of £1,142 in offerings. However, the site more normally generated an income in the region of £400. However, by 1535 this had fallen to a mere £36. In contrast Walsingham that same year received £260 – a sum that outstripped the income of other large pilgrim centres such as nearby Bury St Edmunds even at the height of their popularity. J. Sumption, *Pilgrimage: an image of medieval religion*, London (1975), p.160.

<sup>13</sup> M.R.V. Heale, "Veneration and renovation at a small Norfolk priory: St Leonard's, Norwich in the later Middle Ages," *Historical Research*, vol. 76, no. 194 (November 2003), pp. 431-49.

Although the records do not provide a further breakdown of the figures, enabling exact numbers of pilgrims to be calculated, it is clear that the numbers of pilgrims were not inconsiderable.<sup>14</sup>

Given the obvious number of individuals who, during the later Middle Ages, continued to undertake pilgrimages then perhaps one of the most surprising things is the actual lack of evidence for post mortem pilgrimage bequests in 15th -century wills. However, a number of those wills that do contain bequests for pilgrimages to be undertaken can be quite complex in their requirements. Marion Fenkele of Gipping in the parish of St Peter, Stowmarket, Suffolk, whose will is dated 2nd May 1446, specified that

*a year's stipend to a suitable chaplain to go on pilgrimage for a year to the court of Rome, to celebrate for my soul, and for the souls of John Fenkele my husband, my parents and benefactors and of those for whom I am specially bound... ..  
Dated Monday before the feast of Valentine the Martyr in the said year; Thomas Cake, my cousin and godson, chaplain, to have the aforesaid service to the court of Rome, if he wishes to do it and be our chaplain for 2 or 3 years and celebrate for our souls. A man to go on pilgrimage for us to St James, to St Thomas of Canterbury, offering there according to the discretion of my attorney's, and to Mary of Walsingham, offering the Lady a pound of wax.*<sup>15</sup>

In the cases of a number of wills, particularly those associated with the elite classes and clerics, such post mortem pilgrimage requests could reach levels of complexity clearly indicate a good deal of premeditation and planning. The Priest, Robert Kent of Stowmarket, whose will is dated 29th of April 1443, had made arrangements with his curate as to his intentions for a post mortem pilgrimage, detailing a bequest

*to Sir John Bateler, vicar of Stowe, my curate, to go on pilgrimage and be my chaplain for a whole year, to the court of Rome, he being legally able and willing to take this service upon himself, and to do for my soul and the souls of my parents, kin and benefactors, and of those for whom I am bound, 20 marks, if, for legal reasons, he is not able to do it, another suitable chaplain to be chosen by my execs to make the pilgrimage in like form, he having for his stipend as they may agree and according to their discretion.*<sup>16</sup>

Another example, that of Richard Suttone of Oxborough in the county of Norfolk, dated the 8th of October 1451, required that

*my vows, which I made to divers saints in time of necessity, to be put into effect: a gold coin to be bestowed on St Thomas of Canterbury the archbishop, that is a "crowne," or 3s 4d in its place, and a pilgrim to go on pilgrimage in my name to St Mary of Walsingham, St Edith of Eagle (Acle?) in Lincolnshire, St John of Bridlington and St*

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p. 439.

<sup>15</sup> *Wills of the Archdeaconry of Sudbury, 1439-74*, pt. 1, Fol. 72. (no. 346. Marion Fenkele of Gipping in the parish of St Peter, Stowmarket. 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1446 and 13<sup>th</sup> Feb 1446/7).

<sup>16</sup> *Wills of the Archdeaconry of Sudbury, 1439-74*, pt. 1, Fol. 56. (no. 288. Robert Kent of Stowmarket, 29<sup>th</sup> April, 1443).

*John of Beverley; all these to be carried out faithfully by William Suttone, my attorney, and the money paid and laid out by him with the counsel of Richard the Hermit (Ricardi Heremite) and the advice of the aforesaid Thomas Todenham, knight, out of the proceeds of a tenement in Weston sold by me to the same William for 40 marks, in the presence of Dame Isabel Galyon.*<sup>17</sup>

Likewise, a number of other bequests not only specified the destination of the proposed pilgrimage, and the identity of the pilgrim, but also bound the request with other bequests in the will. In 1440 Isabell Turnour, widow of Sudbury, left to her daughter Christine "*a silk girdle, harnessed with silver, and a pair of jet beads with the paternosters of silver, gilded, and a ring, a brooch and a crucifix.*" However, Christine was only to receive the items "*on condition that she go on pilgrimage to Walsingham for me, to fulfil my promise of old.*"<sup>18</sup> However, in many cases the bequest for a post-mortem pilgrimage is far more general in nature, leaving any details to be settled subsequently. Peter Fysscher of Hepworth, whose will is dated 1st October 1439, stated simply that he bequeathed 40 shillings "*to a suitable man to visit the shrine of St James as a pilgrim for my soul.*" Likewise John Parkyn the elder of Barningham, whose will is dated the 8th April 1460, requests "*an honest pilgrim to go on pilgrimage to Rome, for my soul and the souls for whom I am bound, 5 marks.*"<sup>19</sup>

In some cases these surviving wills are the only evidence we have of local sites of devotion or minor pilgrimage destinations. Alice Cooke of Horstead in Norfolk left bequests in her 15th-century will for pilgrimages to "*Our Lady of Reepham, St Spyrite (Elsing), St Parnell of Stratton, St Leonard without Norwich, St Wandreda of Bixley, St Margaret of Horstead, Our Lady of Pity at Horstead, St John's head at Trimmingham and the Holy Rood of Crostwight.*"<sup>20</sup> None of these sites is recorded elsewhere as a site of pilgrimage with the exception of the previously mentioned "St Leonard without Norwich." Likewise, just over the border in Suffolk the only mention we have of contemporary devotion to "Our Lady of Lakenheath," an image contained within the chancel of Lakenheath Church, is in the 1517 dated will of William Gerard, in which he stipulates that he is to be buried before the image with "*a marble stone upon my grave.*"<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *Wills of the Archdeaconry of Sudbury, 1439-74*, pt. 1, Fol. 107 v. (no. 489. Richard Suttone of Oxborough, 8<sup>th</sup> Oct. 1451).

<sup>18</sup> *Wills of the Archdeaconry of Sudbury, 1439-74*, pt. 1, Fol. 31 b. (no. 175. Isabell Turnour, widow of John Bachbrook, of Sudbury, 12<sup>th</sup> Aug 1440).

<sup>19</sup> *Wills of the Archdeaconry of Sudbury, 1439-74*, pt. 1, Fol. 2v. (no. 17. Peter Fysscher of Hepworth, 1<sup>st</sup> Oct. 1439).

<sup>20</sup> R. Hart, "The Shrines and pilgrimages of the County of Norfolk," *Norfolk Archaeology* vol. vi (1864), p. 27.

<sup>21</sup> J.T. Munday, "Mans Manor" in *Lakenheath Records Series*, Privately Published (1970).





FIGURE 1 Our Lady of Lakenheath, 15th century, Suffolk. Photo: Matthew Champion.

The preceding extracts clearly demonstrate just why wills have become such a well-studied resource in respect of pilgrimage history. Taken in isolation, the wills appear to have the potential to shed light upon the individuals' attitudes towards pilgrimage and add an often forgotten voice to the complex debate that forms the core of any study into the religious belief of the lower orders during the later Middle Ages. However, as a corpus of evidence it has already long been recognized that the surviving wills of the late medieval period have a number of potentially severe limitations.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, detailed analysis of the corpus, rather than the individual, only goes to further highlight these limitations and multiply the questions concerning the validity of these individual wills as a source of evidence. The fundamental question, which has already been asked by several scholars, is how much do these wills truly reflect actual wishes of the testators and, therefore, reflect attitudes to lay piety in general and pilgrimage history in particular?

In the first instance it must be noted that wills were entirely atypical documents. They were often created at a time of both immense physical and spiritual stress. A time when the testator may have been facing imminent death, suffering from life-threatening illness or embarking on a life changing journey of some sort. In some cases this "stress" was the prospect of embarking upon a pilgrimage itself, such as that written in 1460 by Geoffrey Artur of

<sup>22</sup> Webb, *Pilgrimage in Medieval England*, p. 191.

Wattisham, Suffolk, "*dated the day of St Edmund the Archbishop 1460; about to go on pilgrimage.*"<sup>23</sup> This stress is overtly apparent in a number of surviving wills that include bequests for post mortem pilgrimages. In the 1462 will of William Grene of Creting St Peter, Suffolk, he stipulates that "*a suitable priest to go to Rome immediately after my death, and to stay there until he has well and truly completed the stations.*"<sup>24</sup> Likewise, the 1459 will of Thomas Pekerell of Rickingham Superior, Suffolk, provided for pilgrimages to Norwich, Ely, Lowestoft, Bury and "peterthorpe," to begin "*immediately after his decease.*"<sup>25</sup> This insistence upon an immediate start to the requested pilgrimages implies that, to the testator at least, time was a very real consideration. Given the medieval belief in the torments of purgatory, visually reinforced by the images found in almost every parish church in England, the ambition to cleanse the testator's soul at the earliest opportunity must have been a strong one. This stress, fear of death, and the immediate spiritual torment that was likely to follow all but the most unblemished soul, must have been a key influence during the drawing up of the testators' last will. As Diana Webb wrote "the mental state of the soon-to-be-deceased was obviously influential."<sup>26</sup> In addition, as Clive Burgess pointed out, the drawing up of a will was something that was designed to deal with the immediate aftermath of an individual's passing. It dealt with the minutiae of burial and immediate bequests, but "fundamental aspects of both property bequest and pious provision were frequently omitted."<sup>27</sup>

In addition to the atypical nature of wills as documents, and the stress that the testator may have been under when faced with his own day of judgment, it must be remembered that all wills, virtually without exception, were not the result of a free-form creative act by the individual. They followed a standardized formula and were created in an environment where a number of other elements and individuals would also have had influence. The setting of an individual's affairs in order, be it property, land, household possessions or simply their everyday clothing, was an act that almost encouraged participation from both friends and family. Although many testators appear to have dealt with the disposal of large proportions of their estates prior to making a will, it was perhaps a very last opportunity to direct events within their own immediate sphere of influence.<sup>28</sup> This is perhaps demonstrated in wills such as that of Adam Onge of Barningham, who, in 1439 stipulated that his wife was to inherit a large part of his estate as long as she "*do not marry and remain good and chaste (bonum et castam).*" The rest of the estate was

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<sup>23</sup> *Wills of the Archdeaconry of Sudbury, 1439-74*, pt. 1, Fol. 274 v. (no. 1346. Geoffrey Artur of Wattisham, 16 Nov. 1460).

<sup>24</sup> *Wills of the Archdeaconry of Sudbury, 1439-74*, pt. 2, Fol. 336. (no. 89. William Grene of Creting St Peter, 8 Nov. 1462).

<sup>25</sup> *Wills of the Archdeaconry of Sudbury, 1439-74*, pt. 1, Fol. 240 v. (no. 1207. Thomas Pekerell of Rickingham Superior, 25 Jan. 1459/59).

<sup>26</sup> Webb, *Pilgrimage in Medieval England*, p. 191.

<sup>27</sup> C. Burgess, "Late Medieval Wills and Pious Convention: Testamentary Evidence Reconsidered" in M.A. Hicks (ed.), *Profit, Piety and the Professions in Later Medieval England*, Alan Sutton Publishing (1990), p. 15.

<sup>28</sup> Burgess, pp. 16-17.

to go to his son, William Onge, on the condition that he was good to his mother - "*if he do not behave towards his mother, he is to have nothing.*"<sup>29</sup>

Beyond the influence of friends and family, and overriding such influence in matters of spiritual wellbeing, was that of the parish priest. For many members of the parish, the local priest would probably be the last living soul they had contact with upon their deathbed. It would be he who performed those last rites that would shrive them of confessed sins and, in most cases, it was he who transcribed their wishes into the document that became their will. This, in effect, was the channel through which their worldly and spiritual bequests had first to pass. As such the influence of these individuals, whose dedicated task was to ensure the spiritual wellbeing of the everlasting souls under their care, cannot be underestimated. Indeed, the formulaic structure of the late medieval will only went to reinforce this situation and position of influence.

Beginning by commending their soul to almighty God, the Virgin and the saints of heaven, the testator then stipulated where their mortal remains were to lie. For the better-off this was within the church itself, with the average person being content often to simply name a churchyard for burial. Once the disposal of the earthly body had been dealt with, the testator's next act was invariably to make their peace with holy mother church. Payments to the high altar "for tithes overlooked, underpaid or forgotten" were followed by personal, though perhaps guided, bequests to individual images or altars within the church, or specific building projects already in hand. It is difficult to envisage a situation where the parish priest, in the middle of raising funds for a new rood loft or side altar, would fail to draw this to the testator's attention. Then, only after the material obligations associated with the church had been dealt with, for the testator's spiritual well being, did the document turn to the more mundane requests of land and property, friends and family.

In a few remarkable incidents the testator was also entirely reliant upon the good and accurate memory of the priest. Margaret Tye of Sudbury, whose will was dated April 1464, obviously had no time to prepare an official will, but did manage to make her, quite extensive, wishes known to those around her. Suffering from serious infirmity (*gravi infirmitate laborante*) the details of her will were "*carefully remembered and later put in writing*" (*ultima voluntas, diligent memorata et postea in scriptis redacta*).<sup>30</sup> As the document was proved the following February it appears that such practice was accepted and it is interesting to speculate exactly how many such wills were actually created post mortem.

The Wills of the Archdeaconry of Sudbury represent a fascinating opportunity to examine in detail a collected corpus of material and, rather than focusing upon individuals and their recorded bequests, to look at the wider patterns of gift giving and acts of piety. In particular, the sheer quantity of wills recorded from a relatively small area within a clearly defined time period allow analysis of aspects such as scribal influence within a parish, or group of parishes, that is not obvious when examining individual examples.

The archdeaconry of Sudbury was a separate administrative district of the Diocese of Norwich and, until the early 19th century, covered the area that today constitutes the western half of the county of Suffolk and the eastern fringes of Cambridgeshire. The archdeaconry was, despite its name, administratively based upon Bury St Edmunds, although Bury itself was not

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<sup>29</sup> *Wills of the Archdeaconry of Sudbury, 1439-74*, pt. 1, Fol. 23. (no. 124. Adam Onge of Barningham, 31<sup>st</sup> Jan. 1439/40).

<sup>30</sup> *Wills of the Archdeaconry of Sudbury, 1439-74*, pt. 2, Fol. 359. (no. 166 Margaret Tye of Sudbury All Saints, 12 Apr. 1464).



part of the archdeaconry. The town was actually administered by the powerful Abbey of Bury St Edmunds as a separate and independent archdeaconry in its own right. There were other strange anomalies within the archdeaconry as well. Certain parishes, such as Hadleigh, Monks Eleigh, and Moulton, were actually part of the Archbishop of Canterbury's deanery of Bocking in Essex, despite being located within the center of the archdeaconry of Sudbury. However, the archdeaconry of Sudbury contained approximately half of the county of Suffolk within its borders, and in the 15th century this county was amongst the richest in England.<sup>31</sup>

Although many of the individual wills from the archdeaconry were lost many centuries ago, an unusually large number of the probate registers, in which copies of wills were transcribed, do survive. Over 100 volumes contain many tens of thousands of wills dating between 1439 and 1858 are now kept in the Suffolk Records Office. The earliest of these volumes, known simply as "Baldwyne" for reasons now unknown, contains records of over 2300 wills dated between 1439 and 1474. Although "Baldwyne" is not a complete account it does represent a significant corpus of material from a defined area and timeframe that allows at least limited statistical analysis to be undertaken.

The most obvious feature highlighted by even the most cursory examination of "Baldwyne" is that bequests for post mortem pilgrimages are actually a rarity. Of the 2,324 wills recorded during this period only 49 make reference to pilgrimage in one form or another. Of these one will, that of Geoffrey Artur of Wattisham (1460), was actually written prior to his own pilgrimage. In addition, five of the wills actually refer to funds being bequeathed for various masses to be said for the testator's soul at traditional sites of pilgrimage. For example, William Turnour of Walsham (1471) bequeaths 40d "*for a mass at Scala Celi*," whilst Laurence Spragy of Haughley (1470) specifies that three shillings are to go "*to Rome for masses to be celebrated for me and my friends at Scal Celi*."<sup>32</sup> In none of these five cases is the undertaking of a post-mortem pilgrimage specifically mentioned. As Diana Webb indicates, such remote offering of money that did not involve the physical act of pilgrimage appear to become increasingly common in the later 15th century.

Putting aside these six wills, we are then left with only 43 individually recorded wills that specifically make bequests for post mortem pilgrimage - out of a total of over 2300 examples. In statistical terms we are then looking at a little over 2% of surviving wills containing reference to pilgrimage. Although it can be argued that "Baldwyne" contains only a selection of wills from the period, and that losses have been incurred even down to quite recent centuries, there is no evidence that these losses have the potential to dramatically alter such statistics. Indeed, such a percentage of wills containing pilgrimage references actually compare quite favorably with other surviving wills from elsewhere. It must then be concluded that the inclusion of a bequest of this nature was not simply unusual, but extremely rare.<sup>33</sup>

Although the realization that such bequests are extremely rare, and given the large numbers of wills recorded in the Archdeaconry of Sudbury, questioning whether further statistical analysis of the data is worthwhile is justified. However, even the most limited analysis

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<sup>31</sup> P. Northeast and H. Falvey (eds.), "Wills of the Archdeaconry of Sudbury, 1439-74: Wills from the register 'Baldwyne'," pt. 2, *Suffolk Records Society* (2010), Introduction.

<sup>32</sup> *Wills of the Archdeaconry of Sudbury, 1439-74*, pt. 2, Fol. 470 (William Turnour of Walsham, 10 July 1471), *Wills of the Archdeaconry of Sudbury, 1439-74*, pt. 2, Fol. 477 (Laurence Spragy of Haughley, 15 Feb. 1470).

<sup>33</sup> Webb, *Pilgrimage in Medieval England*, p. 192.

of the 43 wills that contain direct reference to pilgrimage makes plain a number of anomalies that are worthy of consideration.

The wills of the archdeaconry that do survive are not uniformly spread across the administrative area, or even chronologically across the period. Certain parishes, or groups of parishes, are represented by a far higher number of surviving wills than others. The assumption that these concentrations of surviving material would be centered upon the parishes that contained larger settlements, such as the market towns of Sudbury, Haverhill or Lavenham, would appear to be largely borne out by the evidence. However, there are also notable exceptions. Whilst population centers such as Sudbury and neighboring Long Melford and Glemsford appear well-represented, with 88, 42 and 33 wills respectively, similar market centers such as Haverhill and Eye, with 27 and 31 wills, appear less well so. Similarly, in the relatively sparsely populated edge of fenland the village of Mildenhall is represented by 61 wills, whilst its neighbor Lakenheath, which was economically similar in many respects, is represented by only nine wills. The same slightly uneven distribution is also seen at the smaller parish level. Parishes such as Ixworth and Woolpit, both of which may be regarded as reasonably affluent, are represented by 24 and 29 wills respectively. However, similarly affluent parishes such as Brent Eleigh and Hengrave are barely represented, with only two and three wills respectively. However, taken across the entire archdeaconry it would appear that the number of surviving wills does correspond in general terms with the relative local population. In purely geographical terms, taken across the entire period, this creates a number of concentrations of wills, or "hot spots."

In purely statistical terms those wills that contain reference to pilgrimage should also show a similar geographic bias as those that do not. Although the limited numbers of wills may be considered to have the potential to slightly alter this bias, a concentration of these wills around certain numerical hot spots should be identifiable. However, this is not the case. Geographical analysis of the 43 wills does indicate certain concentrations in their location. However, these new "hot spots" do not correspond to the areas where the general wills are concentrated. Whilst Sudbury and Glemsford, two of the most noticeable general concentrations of surviving wills, are represented by two specific references to pilgrimage in each parish, the 43 wills of neighboring Long Melford contain none. Similarly the 45 wills of Lavenham contain only one reference to pilgrimage, whilst the 61 wills of Mildenhall contain none.

Indeed, the "hot spots" associated with reference to pilgrimage in their wills are located well away from the previously identified concentration. Intriguingly, of the parishes that sit along the northern edge of the archdeaconry eleven of them represent between them 19 wills that contain specific reference to pilgrimage. The parish of Barningham, is represented by only 18 wills and yet three of these contain pilgrimage references. Nearby Rickingham Inferior is represented by only nine wills, two of which contain pilgrimage references. Its neighbor, Rickingham Superior, is represented by only eight wills, of which two contain pilgrimage references. Neighboring Botesdale and Thelnetham are represented by 19 and 16 wills respectively, and yet both have two wills that contain pilgrimage references. In all this collection

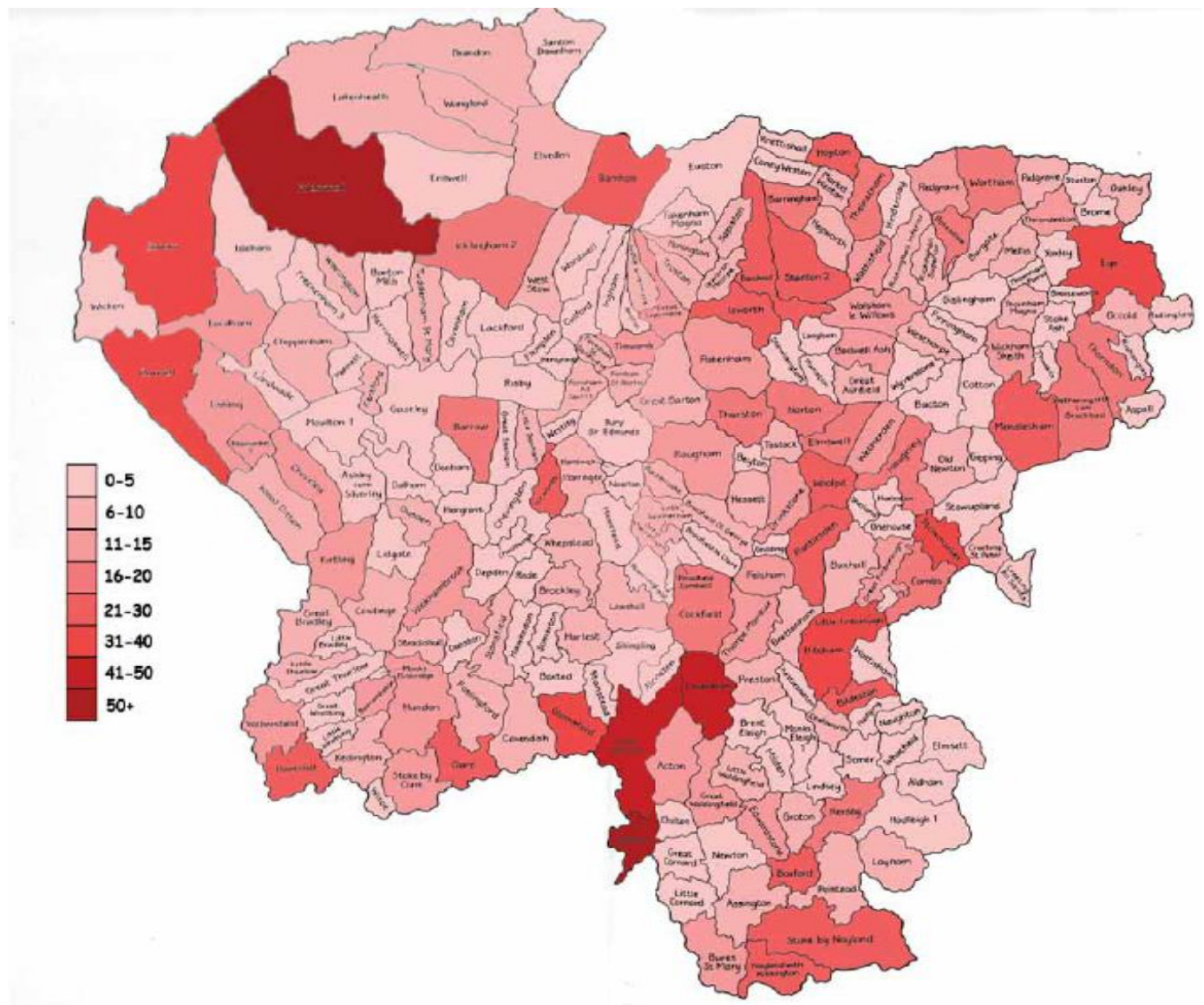


FIGURE 2 Number of wills surviving in late medieval Suffolk, by parish. Map: author.

of parishes, strung out along the Norfolk border, contains over 40% of all the wills that contain pilgrimage references – yet represent less than 5% of the total wills recorded. This area, which appears centered upon the six parishes of Rickingham Superior, Rickingham Inferior, Barningham, Bottesdale, Thelnetham and Hepworth, clearly shows a marked bias for the surviving wills to contain pilgrimage references. A similar concentration of pilgrimage references appears further south centered upon the parishes of Stowmarket, Newton, Haughley and Creeting St Peter. Although this concentration is located around a significant population

center, it is worthy of note that Stowmarket appears less-well represented in terms of general numbers of surviving wills than its contemporaries.

The number of pilgrimage references contained in the wills of these areas is statistically improbable. If these inclusion of pilgrimage bequests in wills was entirely a reflection of the individual then, in purely statistical terms, the references should be spread throughout the archdeaconry in a similar manner to the wills in general. In simple terms, the majority of references should be concentrated around the population centers of such market towns as Sudbury and the neighboring parishes of Glemsford and Long Melford. That they are not located in these places, but demonstrate a clear, but different, geographical bias, would strongly suggest that other factors have influenced the testator's decision to include a pilgrimage bequest in their will.

What possible factors could be causing these concentrations of bequests for post mortem pilgrimage? In the first instance, the influence of family, friends, neighbors and even local tradition cannot be ruled out. That Thomas Grene of Creting St Peter requested a pilgrimage to Rome in his will of 1439 may well have influenced the 1462 bequest of a William Grene of Creting St Peter for a pilgrimage to Rome and Compostela.<sup>34</sup> Likewise, the 1448 request of

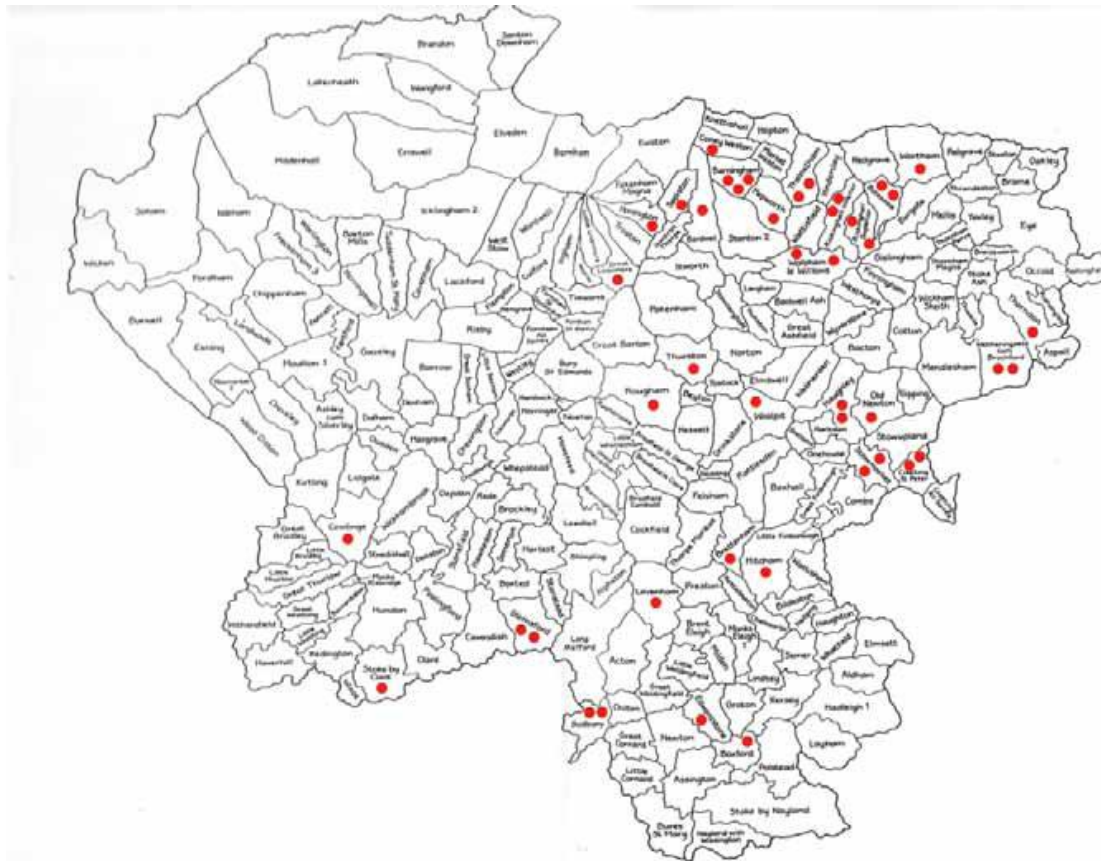


FIGURE 3 Distribution of wills containing post-mortem pilgrimage requests by parish in Suffolk. Map: author.

<sup>34</sup> *Wills of the Archdeaconry of Sudbury, 1439-74*, pt. 1, Fol. 3. (no. 20 Thomas Grene of Creting St Peter, 31<sup>st</sup> Oct. 1439), *Wills of the Archdeaconry of Sudbury, 1439-74*, pt. 2, Fol. 336. (no. 89 William Grene of Creting St Peter, 8 Nov 1462).

Richard Chapman of Rickinghall Inferior for a pilgrimage to Rome may have influenced the 1471 request of John Chapman of the same parish for a pilgrimage to the same destination.<sup>35</sup>

In a similar vein, the 1471 bequest of Thomas Roote of Glemsford for a pilgrim to visit Walsingham and Canterbury was probably echoed in Nicholas Roberdson of Glemsford's request the same destinations for pilgrimage the following year.<sup>36</sup> However, the similarity in chosen destinations between testators may actually be pointing to a much more immediate influencing factor. In the neighboring parishes of Walsham le Willows, Botesdale, and Rickinghall Inferior, the wills of Joan Robhood (1468), Thomas Goldfynche (May 1471) and John Chapman (April 1471) all requested post-mortem pilgrimages to "*the sepulchres of the Apostles Peter and Paul*" (Rome).<sup>37</sup> The request for pilgrimages to the same specific destination, coupled with the exact same terminology used in each will, would suggest that the influencing factor may well have been the individual who actually scribed the wills themselves. This is perhaps further supported by a general examination of the bequests for pilgrimage that appear in the concentration of wills surrounding the six parishes of Rickinghall Superior, Rickinghall Inferior, Barningham, Botesdale, Thelnetham and Hepworth. Of the 12 bequests for post-mortem pilgrimage contained in the wills of these parishes no less than eight specify Rome as the destination - a far higher proportion than the average at this period.

The suggestion of scribal influence in the bequests of testators is nothing new.<sup>38</sup> However, the extent of this influence is more difficult to quantify. That both Nicholas Rodys (April 1472) and Simon Turnour (March 1472) left bequests to "*the east window of the south side*" of Combs church, as opposed the numerous other windows in the building, may well reflect nothing more than local support for a major building project.<sup>39</sup> Likewise, the bequests of Rose Goddrych (August 1470) and Isabel Machon (April 1471) for windows in the newly built porch of Felsham church may be no more than a local desire to see a long running project completed.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> *Wills of the Archdeaconry of Sudbury, 1439-74*, pt. 1, Fol. 85 v. (no.393 Richard Chapman of Rickinghall Inferior, 24<sup>th</sup>, May, 1448), *Wills of the Archdeaconry of Sudbury, 1439-74*, pt. 2, Fol. 480 (no. 522 John Chapman the elder of Rickinghall Inferior, 11 April 1471).

<sup>36</sup> *Wills of the Archdeaconry of Sudbury, 1439-74*, pt. 2, Fol. 476 (no. 508 Thomas Roote of Glemsford, 30 June 1471), *Wills of the Archdeaconry of Sudbury, 1439-74*, pt. 2, Fol. 519 (no. 640 Nicholas Roberdson of Glemsford, 22 Feb. 1472).

<sup>37</sup> *Wills of the Archdeaconry of Sudbury, 1439-74*, pt. 2, Fol. 434 (no.401 Joan Robhood of Walsham le Willows, widow, 1 August 1468), *Wills of the Archdeaconry of Sudbury, 1439-74*, pt. 2, Fol. 460 (no. 467 Thomas Goldfynche of Botesdale, 9 May 1471), *Wills of the Archdeaconry of Sudbury, 1439-74*, pt. 2, Fol. 480 (no. 522 John Chapman the elder of Rickinghall Inferior, 11 April 1471).

<sup>38</sup> The role of scribal influence of wills, with particular emphasis upon the form and structure of wills has been the subject of numerous studies. See C. Burgess, "Late Medieval Wills and Pious Convention: Testamentary Evidence Reconsidered" in M.A. Hicks (ed.), *Profit, Piety and the Professions in Later Medieval England*, Alan Sutton Publishing (1990), n. 6.

<sup>39</sup> P. Northeast and H. Falvey (eds.), "Wills of the Archdeaconry of Sudbury, 1439-74: Wills from the register 'Baldwyne'," pt. 2, *Suffolk Records Society* (2010), p. lvii.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*



However, the close dating of such bequests would suggest that such charitable acts were undoubtedly being directed towards works that would have been close to the heart of the parish priest. However, to be able to suggest that such clusters of similar bequests, be it for pilgrimage or building works, were the result of scribal influence then it should also be able to demonstrate that other clusters or hot spots for identical bequests also exist.

In the over 2,300 wills of the archdeaconry of Sudbury it is possible to identify a number of other bequest hot spots that, like those for post mortem pilgrimage, show significant statistical anomalies in their location. A general examination of bequests made for the painting of images within the church, albeit rarely defined as being either a statue or wall paintings, also show very clear geographical bias. Once again the areas that contain a large number of surviving wills, such as the parishes of Sudbury, Long Melford and Lavenham, do not appear as concentrations of bequests for image painting. Interestingly, the area to the north of the archdeaconry, where the concentration of pilgrimage bequests is located, is also largely devoid of image painting bequests. The principle concentration of these bequests is in the area of Stowmarket, in the far east of the archdeaconry. Here, within six parishes, are to be found 11 out of the 29 painting bequests. Although it must be acknowledged that Stowmarket does represent a minor population

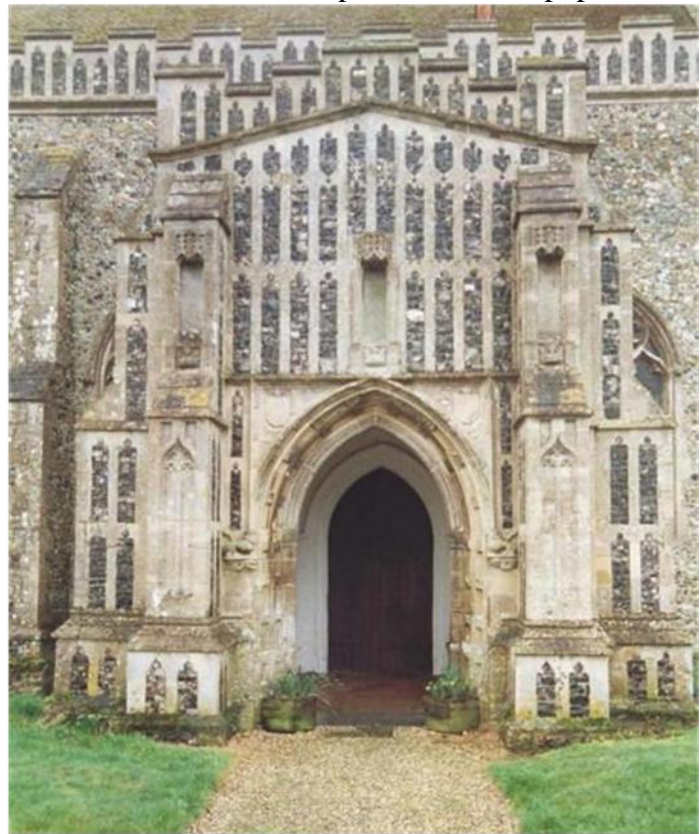


FIGURE 4a Acts of Mercy Window, 15th-century, Church of St. Mary, Combs, Suffolk;  
FIGURE 3b Porch, Felsham Church of St. Peter. 15th century, Felsham, Suffolk. Photos: Alice Malliet.



center, and does contain a significant number of surviving wills, the level of concentration is such that, in purely statistical terms, it is comparable with the concentration of pilgrimage bequests located in the north.

The identification of these multiple bequest concentrations, lying away from population centers and areas that show concentrations of surviving wills, indicate that factors other than probability are likely to be influencing the statistics. The nature of the bequests, and the repeated use of the same phraseology within the documents, would suggest that we are seeing a significant level of influence or intervention from the priest or scribe. Although some of these bequests, and repetitions, may well be the result of local influence of family, friends or neighbors, the level of concentrations and their distribution throughout the parish hierarchy would suggest that the most likely source was the parish priest himself.

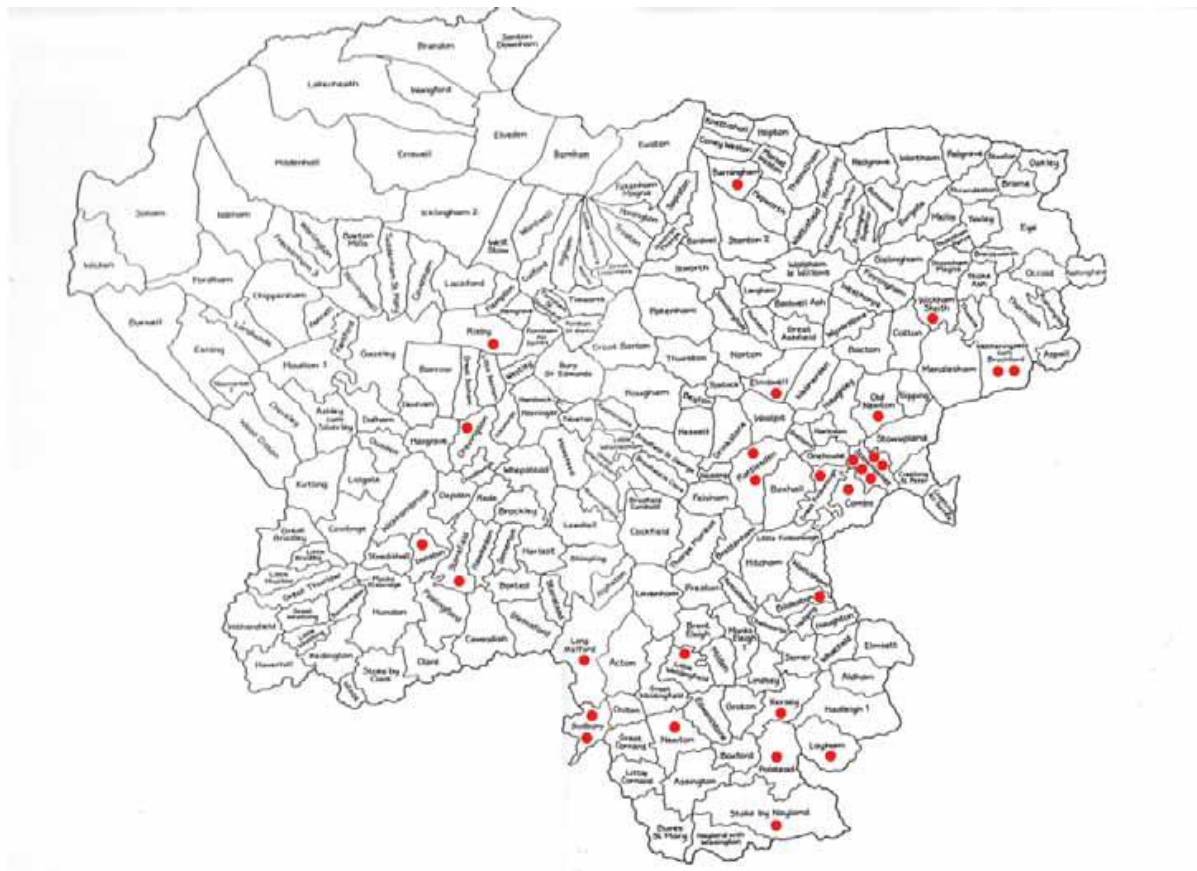


FIGURE 5 Distribution of wills containing painting bequests, by parish in late medieval Suffolk. Map: author.

## Conclusions

Although wills have long been regarded as a key source of evidence regarding aspects of lay piety and pilgrimage amongst the commonality and middling sort the value of these documents, and their veracity as primary sources, must be regarded as questionable. In the first instance, the number of wills that include reference to post mortem pilgrimage constitute a very small percentage of all surviving wills. In the archdeaconry of Sudbury, which may be regarded

as a reasonably typical example, such references appear in only a little over 2% of surviving documents. As seen in the wider corpus, these documents are atypical, often created at a time of extreme physical and spiritual stress. They are subject to external influence, from friends, family and, above all perhaps, those individuals who both drafted the wills themselves and were responsible for the spiritual wellbeing of the testator. This clerical influence, as evidenced by the geographical and chronological concentration of bequests in the wills of the archdeaconry of Sudbury, would appear to be an extremely significant factor in the nature of the bequests they contain in terms of post mortem pilgrimage. Although in most cases such clerical influence can never be precisely demonstrated, with few parishes containing the depth of documentation needed to rule out all other possible influencing factors, there are a small number of examples that may act as exemplars of the larger phenomena.

Recent analysis by Eamon Duffy of the tiny 16<sup>th</sup>-century West Country parish of Morebath, based upon the accounts of the long serving vicar, have clearly shown how one individual can, over the period of a single lifetime, introduce, promote and firmly establish devotion to a local cult.<sup>41</sup> Shortly after his arrival in the parish in 1520 Sir Christopher Trychay introduced into his tiny church the cult of St Sidwell, a local saint with whom he had an affinity. He began his long campaign by personally paying 33s 4d for a gilded statue of the saint that was set up on the "Jesus altar." The first modest bequests came within three years with minor gifts of altar cloths and a brass bowl. However, what began as a trickle of bequests soon developed into a steady and regular stream of gifts. Lamps, basins, lights and even swarms of bees were soon being devoted to the saint and by 1526 the saint even had her own small "store," administered by the churchwardens and supported by her own flock of sheep. Between her introduction in 1520 and the banning of such images in 1546, St Sidwell gradually became a cornerstone of parish devotion, which resulted in the statue eventually being adorned with gold and silver surrounded by colored and painted cloths - and even the naming of at least two of the parishes children as "Sydwell."<sup>42</sup> From the middle of the 1520s onwards it is a rare parish will that does not contain bequests and gifts to the saint. Indeed, examination of the parish wills, without prior knowledge of the priest's devotion and promotion of the cult of St Sidwell, would suggest to researchers a strong local tradition. However, by examining the wills in the context of the wider parish records, it becomes clear that this sudden upwelling of devotion to the saint was the result of a single individual's influence and dogged persistence.

It must, therefore, be concluded that the use and analysis of wills in isolation, be it concerning pilgrimage bequests or devotion to wider cults, is fraught with possible dangers of misinterpretation. Indeed, as Burgess states, "wills were not designed to serve historians."<sup>43</sup> Given that historians of pilgrimage and lay piety are reliant upon only single passing references to evidence the existence of certain local cults, as shown with such sites as Our Lady of Reepham and Our Lady of Lakenheath, we must remain cautious of ascribing too much significance to such references, no matter how fascinating they may appear. Although

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<sup>41</sup> Eamon Duffy, *The voices of Morebath; Reformation and Rebellion in an English Village*, Yale University Press, 2001.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. pp.73-78.

<sup>43</sup> C. Burgess, "Late Medieval Wills," p. 15.



FIGURE 6 Church of St Sidwell, Morebath, Devon, mostly 15th century. Photo: Alice Malliet.

they may be evidence of a popular cult of limited duration that has been previously overlooked, as well may be the case with the West Country "Maiden of Marston" who appears in a handful of 15th century Suffolk wills, they are just as likely to be simply manifestations of the influence of local priests who were perhaps, less persuasive and persistent than Morebath's Sir Christopher Trychay.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> The "Maiden of Manston" appears in two wills of the archdeaconry of Sudbury (Isabel Man of Brettenham and Margaret Tye of Sudbury). She is also mentioned in the 1477 Suffolk will of Christopher Bennytt of Debenham (SROI, vol. II, fol. 347) and the 1484 will of John Tizard of Cratfield (SROI, IC/AA2/3/152). Although the site of this probable image shrine has been tentatively identified as being near Shaftesbury in Dorset little else is known of it. Why it should significantly feature in Suffolk wills of the period remains a mystery.