Thompson, W. ‘Churchwardens in early Tudor England: On the Edge of Sacred and Secular’,
Mahood, H. (University of Reading, October 2016) pp.76-92
The office of churchwarden traditionally stood between the concerns of the local parish community and the ecclesiastical and political elite. As such, churchwardens performed a valuable mediating function in early Tudor society. However, the religious changes introduced during the latter half of Henry VIII’s reign (1530–1547) put churchwardens under increasing strain. With the introduction of new policies on religious images, church fabric, and increasingly evangelical worship forms, churchwardens found themselves at odds with either their neighbours or church authorities, depending on the circumstances. This article examines late-Henrician churchwardens’ accounts from several East Anglian parishes to trace this change in relationship between local officials and the Henrician state. I argue that late-Henrician religious changes pressured churchwardens to choose between serving their communities and serving the crown. Churchwardens’ precarious situation shows that rather than establishing religious uniformity, the Henrician Reformation sowed seeds of discord and disunity in many English parishes.

The Henrician battle over theology and material religion was waged with perhaps the most urgency in the local parish church. Churchwardens’ accounts from the Suffolk parishes of Boxford, Cratfield, and Mildenhall, and the Norfolk parish of Tilney, show that while Henry VIII’s Reformation was initiated from above, it was wholly dependent on the cooperation of people at the local level. Henrician religion incorporated both traditional and evangelical elements and satisfied few as a result; however, the policies it sanctioned permitted a variety of interpretations. It was in the act of interpreting new religious policies that churchwardens chose between following royal orders or following their consciences.

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3 The Henrician period is pre-confessional and people would not have recognised the later labels often associated with them, therefore I use the term ‘evangelical’ to describe those who favored religious change and who would be identified later as Protestants. Conversely, the term ‘conservative’ or ‘traditional’ will describe those who adhered to traditional (Catholic) religion. For a similar definition of Henrician religious identities, see MacCulloch, D. The Boy King: Edward VI and the Protestant Reformation. (New York. 1999) p.2-4.
Material Religion and the English Parish Church

Late medieval religion was suffused with material connections between the profane and the holy. The parish church was consecrated for the purpose of worshipping God and particular attention was devoted to its interior decoration. Eamon Duffy, Christopher Haigh, and others have shown that there was no lack of lay enthusiasm for this system in the early sixteenth century. Yet over the last decade of Henry VIII’s reign, English church interiors were remade in effort to avoid the perils of idolatrous abuse. Margaret Aston has observed that ‘the Reformation for most believers meant the reformation of their parish church’. This is certainly the case in our case study parishes where local churchwardens scrambled to come to terms with these changes and implemented them with a great deal of variation, much of which can be attributed to their personal agency and beliefs. Following the thread of personal agency, this article is thus guided by Peter Marshall’s assertion that the English Reformation should be viewed as ‘a crucible of religious identity formation’, where the uncertain nature of religious change ‘had a profoundly catechising effect, encouraging people to think about their meanings more intensely than they had done before’. The choice to destroy or to preserve religious images was therefore an expression of belief that aided the creation of distinct religious identities over time and often put churchwardens at odds with royal policies.

Most scholars now agree that the traditional Catholic religious culture of late medieval England was alive and well in the early sixteenth century. Pounds describes the interior of the pre-Reformation parish church as ‘a colourful place. Its walls were painted with moralities and biblical scenes; its windows were glazed with stained and painted glass. Figures of saints and evangelists filled the panels of its rood-screen . . . [and] there were candles for all occasions’. Lights stood before various images in the church, were required on the high altar for mass, were carried in processions, and sat on the candle beam before the Great Rood. An enthusiastic culture of community giving is clear in the frequent receipts from tithes, wax silver, and bequests of money and land found in parish accounts. For example, Judith Middleton Stewart has traced the collections and gatherings for Mildenhall from 1446–1454 and these late-medieval documents record income from church ales, plays, and donations, beyond the usual income and expenditure noted in churchwardens’ accounts. During this nine-year

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8 Wax silver was a collection specifically meant to maintain the many candles that stood in the church interior. The accounts for Crafield from the 1490s also reveal a series of restoration projects, including a painter hired to create an image of Mary and renew her tabernacle and that of St. Edmund. Crafield CWA. pp.20-4. For more on the strength of religious culture in pre-reformation English parish communities, see: Hutton, R. ‘The Local Impact of the Tudor Reformations’, in Haigh, C. (ed.) The English Reformation Revised. (Cambridge. 1987) pp.115-16.
period the churchwardens recorded the ‘vital drip-feed of church money undertaken while building works were carried out’. 9

Such activities were commonplace throughout the late-medieval period and some continued well into the Henrician era. Accounts from earlier in Henry VIII’s reign are full of entries for expanding churches, obtaining new plate and vestments, and decorating the rood, altars, and other church furniture. For example, in 1506 the Mildenhall churchwardens paid to install alabaster panels in the rood loft and paint it. 10 In 1507 they commissioned a ‘payntyng of Owr Lady’, one of many images of the Virgin in the church. 11 Laypeople placed high priority on enhancing public worship space and the churchwardens were responsible for carrying out their wishes. In fact, Ronald Hutton believes that many parishioners were concerned that the local church ‘might become too over-decorated to allow of further elaboration’. 12

Evidence from pre-Reformation church inventories reinforces Hutton’s statement. The 1529 inventory for another Suffolk parish, Holy Trinity Church in Long Melford, lists thirteen communion chalices alone, nearly two for each of the church’s seven altars. 13 Eighteen other pieces of gilded plate and accessories are listed, plus ‘a relique of the pillar that our Saviour Christ was bound to, the gift of Sir William Clopton, Knight, inclosed with silver’. 14 Many of these items were used in regular liturgical services and there is an additional list for the Lady Chapel, including jewels, ornaments, and three fine coats for the statue of the Virgin Mary. 15 Many entries in the inventory name the parishioner or parishioners who donated or purchased the item. 16 In this way the memory of their pious bequest would be extended beyond their lifetime through regular use of the item in the church, through parishioners’ prayers for their soul, and in the parish’s written records. Holy Trinity possessed furnishings richer than the average church, yet the 1529 inventory is a useful example of the diversity of church fabric as well as lay donation practices common to all parishes before the Reformation. Such enthusiasm makes the later Henrician changes seem even more drastic by comparison.

The Henrician Reformation may have been initiated from above but it was dependent on the cooperation of people at the local level. 17 Tudor monarchs lacked a standing army, a police force, and

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9 Mildenhall CWA. pp.lxi-lxii.
10 Mildenhall CWA. pp.44-6.
11 Ibid. p.51.
15 Ibid. pp.70-2.
16 Ibid. pp.67-79.
17 The most notable example of this view is Shagan, E. Popular Politics and the English Reformation. (Cambridge. 2003) p.25. John Craig and Caroline Lützenberger also argue for the importance of dynamic interaction between government and people in effecting religious change. See Lützenberger, C. The English
an extensive bureaucracy; so they utilised those subjects who were willing to collaborate with them. I thus agree with Ethan Shagan’s observation that ‘the English Reformation was not done to people, it was done with them’. Many accounts tend to downplay the importance of the local context in which changes took place, focusing instead on the royal court, theological debate, and political considerations. Furthermore, John Craig observes that ‘the discussion of the relationship between official policy and local practice has seldom penetrated deeper than the level of the gentry’. Some churchwardens came from gentry families, but most were tradesmen, merchants, and yeomen. Thus part of my purpose in using churchwardens’ accounts is to analyse records created by those from the middling ranks of early Tudor society, and in so doing to see how average laypeople dealt with these immense changes.

**Early Evangelicals and Henry VIII’s Initial Reforms**

Long before any changes to official policy on religion, there were evangelicals in East Anglia who opposed what they viewed as superstition and idolatry in traditional religion. Many of these were university-educated priests who had been converted to the evangelical faith by reading Luther, Tyndale, and others. However, this emergent theological radicalism was not restricted to an educated elite. There were also many merchants with continental connections who had come around to the new faith on their own. Felicity Heal notes that in 1530 Bishop Nix of Norwich told the Duke of Norfolk that ‘merchants and those living near the sea were infected with erroneous doctrines’. Norfolk native and itinerant preacher Thomas Bilney, a Cambridge convert, undertook preaching tours of Suffolk in 1526–27 and 1530–31, where John Craig notes that his sermons were ‘directed against pilgrimages and images and his emphasis was upon the sufficiency of Christ’s work of redemption, a high view of scripture and of preaching’. It is thought that East Anglia harboured lingering Lollard influences and it is possible that Bilney built on this base in preaching there. Though he did enjoy some local support Bilney’s incendiary message led to his arrest and conviction as a heretic before the Bishop of Norwich’s court, and he was executed in August 1531. John Foxe later claimed in his *Acts and

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Monuments that Bilney’s preaching and execution had inspired a rash of iconoclastic violence in the Stour River Valley during the early 1530s. This included the outbreak of iconoclasm directly after Foxe’s account of Bilney’s preaching, trials, and execution, which included incidents at Cogshall, Great Horkesleigh, Sudbury, Ipswich, and Stoke Park.24

The most notorious iconoclastic incident of the period was the 1532 destruction of the famed Rood of Dovercourt near Harwich in Essex. The Dovercourt rood was believed to have miraculous powers and Foxe’s account names four conspirators, three from Dedham and one from East Bergholt, ‘whose consciences were so burned to se the honor and power of almighty liuing God to be blasphemed by such an Idoll . . . were mowed by the spirite of God to trauaile out of Dedham in a wondrous goodly night’ on a ten-mile hike to the site of the offending rood.25 The men removed the rood ‘without any resistance of the said Idol’ and burned it outside of town, sparing only its coat, which they delivered to Thomas Rose, the curate at Hadleigh and a former associate of Bilney, who promptly burned it as well.26 Although never proven, it was suspected at the time that Rose had been involved in plotting the Dovercourt iconoclasm, which led to his subsequent arrest and imprisonment under Bishop Longland at Holborn and the end of his brief stint in Hadleigh.27 MacCulloch believes that the iconoclasts probably acted in protest against the recent execution of Bilney.28 Three of the four men were burned for their crime while the fourth narrowly escaped. It is interesting to note that the men traveled beyond their own villages to undertake their destructive act. Referring to a fifteenth-century episode, Richard Marks suggests that iconoclasts may have directed their actions elsewhere for ‘fear of incurring the wrath of their orthodox fellow-parishioners’.29 So, at this early date iconoclasts may have thought it wiser to act under the cover of anonymity in a distant community rather than attack perceived idols in their own parish churches. This attitude changed once the crown began to endorse iconomachic policies in the mid 1530s.

Issued in June 1536, the Ten Articles spelled out key doctrines in Henry VIII’s new church, including a modified approach to images.30 The sixth article presented a restrained view of images, affirming their rightful presence in churches, but reminding parishioners that ‘as for kneeling and offering unto them . . . the people ought to be diligently taught that they in no wise do it, nor think it meet to be

25 Foxe. TAMO (1563) 3: 552.
26 Ibid.
30 For text of the Ten Articles, see Bray, G. L. Documents of the English Reformation. (1994; repr., Cambridge. 2004) pp.162-74. The first five articles were directly influenced by the unpublished Wittenberg Articles, the product of meetings between English and Lutheran reformers in early 1536, and had been influenced by the Lutheran Augsburg Confession of 1530.
done to the same images, but only to be done to God, and in his honour, although it be done before the images’.  31 This cautious wording reiterated the traditional image-prototype view that prayers and offerings to images were not really directed at the material object but to that which they signified. Of course, as Margaret Aston observes, ‘what believers learnt to believe was not the same as what they were authorised to believe’ and there were likely those who muddied this careful theological distinction.  32

What encouragement the Ten Articles gave to evangelicals and the iconoclasts among them was tempered by cautious language elsewhere. Clearly, the Henrician regime was not yet willing to go as far as evangelicals might have liked. This was further evidenced by articles seven through nine, which outlined a traditional approach to honoring and praying to saints and also retained liturgical practices such as ashes on Ash Wednesday, palms on Palm Sunday, creeping to the cross, and use of the Easter sepulcher. Still, an evangelical disclaimer added that ‘none of these ceremonies have power to remit sin, but only to stir and lift up our minds unto God, by whom only our sins be forgiven’. 33

The Henrician Injunctions, 1536 & 1538

The First Henrician Injunctions, which Thomas Cromwell attached to the Ten Articles in 1536, expanded the careful language on images to suggest, in item four, that ‘it shall profit more their soul’s health, if they do bestow that on the poor and needy, which they would have bestowed upon ... images or relics’. 34 The most curious item ordered every parish to obtain both a Latin and English Bible for parishioners to read. 35 This was ambitious at best and none of the four parishes complied.

31 Ibid. p.171.
35 See the order in VAI. 2:9; for full explanation of the issue, see ibid. 2:1–2. There is some question over whether this item was included in the final list of Injunctions circulated among the bishops and lower clergy in 1536. MacCulloch observes that the order for Bibles ‘was a curiously impractical trumpeting of evangelical idealism’, especially since the only complete English translation at that time was Coverdale’s unauthorised quarto. As a result, ‘many later copies of the injunctions omit it [the order]; nevertheless various [evangelical] bishops tried to follow it up in their own orders during 1537’. MacCulloch, D. Thomas Cranmer: A Life. (New Haven. 1996) p.166, and fn.95. Even some primary source collections omit this order; see: Dickens. A. G. and Carr, D.  The Reformation in England to the Accession of Elizabeth I. Documents of Modern History. (New York. 1968) pp.77-81; and Bray.  Documents. pp.175-8. Thanks to Caroline Litzenberger for pointing out this contradiction.

Margaret Bowker noted the same problem in a chapter published several years before MacCulloch. She identified discrepancies in two respected collections of primary documents and reasoned that ‘the diocesan injunctions of 1537 for Worcester and Litchfield and Coventry include the order, and it is improbable that a diocesan would proceed in this controversial matter without the backing of a royal injunction’. Bowker, M. ‘The Henrician Reformation and the Parish Clergy’, in Haigh, C. (ed.)  The English Reformation Revised. (1987; repr. Cambridge. 2000) p.76, fn.8. For the 1537 diocesan orders for Bibles, see VAI. 2:19-25.
until the early 1540s, nor did many elsewhere. It took another set of royal injunctions in 1538 and a royal proclamation in 1541 carrying financial penalties for noncompliance to get parishes to obtain Bibles. Most of all, it took time for parishioners to become comfortable with the idea that they had the right and the need to read the Bible for themselves. This is an early example of churchwardens exercising their authority to ignore, or at least delay, enforcing changes in religious policy. Beyond the Bible order, the Injunctions sought to eliminate supposed superstition through education. Priests were to read the Ten Articles to their congregations and not to ‘set forth or extol’ images and relics that were the focus of superstition.\(^{36}\)

Unfortunately, Bishop Nix’s visitation articles for the diocese of Norwich do not survive, so it is not clear whether he chose to include the Bible order. However, as a conservative, he would have been unlikely to do so. This being the case, there was little visible reaction to the 1536 Injunctions in our parishes and no adherence to the Bible order. The major expenditure of 1536 in Mildenhall was the casting and installation of a bell in the steeple, and the next year they paid an artisan to mend their old liturgical books.\(^{37}\) Meanwhile, the churchwardens at Tilney All Saints made repairs to the church floor and purchased frankincense for the traditional celebration of Easter Mass.\(^{38}\) Priests and parents may have been more diligent in teaching children the Ten Commandments, Paternoster, and the Apostles’ Creed, as directed by the Injunctions, but parish life was relatively unchanged.\(^{39}\) The same could not be said for other parts of England, as 1536 saw determined protests against Henry VIII’s policies, especially with the Pilgrimage of Grace in the North.\(^{40}\) Protests did not halt these changes, however, and more extensive alterations were ahead.

The Second Henrician Injunctions, in 1538, again required each parish to obtain a Bible, now only in English.\(^{41}\) This new order cautiously promoted the evangelical notion of the primacy of the Word. The third item admonished those who read the Bible to avoid disputes over it and to ‘refer the explication of obscure places to men of higher judgment in Scripture’.\(^{42}\) The regime was clearly wary

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\(^{36}\) VAI. 2:5.

\(^{37}\) The bell project cost £2 14s. 11d. The book repairs totalled £1 12s. 5d. *Mildenhall CWA*. pp.79-80, 81-2.

\(^{38}\) *Tilney CWA*. p.150.

\(^{39}\) VAI. 2:6-8.

\(^{40}\) The two major domestic threats to Henry’s religious policies both occurred in northern England during 1536. The Lincolnshire Rising was a fierce, yet abortive, attempt at stopping royal commissioners from assessing church property, while the Pilgrimage of Grace posed a legitimate threat to the king’s newfound religious authority. Popular concern over the Dissolution certainly played a part in stirring these rebellions, especially the latter one, but Fletcher and MacCulloch show that many other factors were in play, including an attempted political power grab by the rebellion’s noble leaders and economic concerns over increased taxation to fund Henry’s foreign wars; see Fletcher, A. and MacCulloch, D. *Tudor Rebellions*, 5th ed. Seminar Studies in History. (Harlow. 2004) pp.26-47.

\(^{41}\) Injunction II, in VAI. 2:35-6. Bibles were ordered to be in place by the next Easter, April 6, 1539. The cost was to be split between the incumbent and his parishioners. Like its predecessor in 1536, the injunction did not stipulate a penalty for non-compliance; this omission was remedied in 1541.

\(^{42}\) Injunction III, in VAI. 2:36.
of allowing people to read scripture, and yet still willing to run the risk. The Injunctions also outlawed pilgrimages and ordered that no candles be set before images except on the candle beam before the rood, on the altar at mass, and on the Easter sepulcher. Priests were to teach parishioners that ‘images serve for none other purpose but as to be books of unlearned men that cannot know letters’, and should they ‘abuse for any other intent than for such remembrances, they commit idolatry in the same to the great danger of their souls’. Though it lacked a specific definition of the word ‘abused’ these Injunctions promoted a stricter interpretation of the commandment against idolatry, thus giving iconoclasts greater latitude and putting iconophiles under increased pressure to conform.

The 1538 Injunctions had a noticeable impact on our parishes. The Cratfield accounts show that in 1538 the wardens paid workmen ‘for the fellyng of the rowell’ that hung before the rood and held candles to light it. This illicit action was not sanctioned by the Injunctions, which had permitted the ‘common light’ to remain. This may indicate a desire for religious change among some members of the community, possibly the churchwardens themselves. Conversely, the Mildenhall wardens were still taking collections for the parish’s papal indulgences, though they now shrewdly called them by another name. Likewise, Tilney’s wardens continued to take collections for paschal silver, May money, Trinity Sunday, and Plow Monday. None of the parishes purchased a Bible for at least another three years. This delay may have reflected frugality, since the Great Bible cost 12s, or just plain resistance to making the Bible available.

The 1538 Injunctions generated more radical interpretations elsewhere in East Anglia. Wriothesley’s Chronicle notes that in 1538 priests in Hadleigh (Suff.) began saying the mass in English. Craig thinks that ‘this early innovation, if sustained, perhaps marked the beginning of a new emphasis’ by local reformers, who, by having the mass said in English could have gone ‘beyond iconoclasm to an attack upon transubstantiation and an adherence to justification by faith’. Five miles west of Hadleigh, Boxford parishioners must have known about their neighbours’ actions, and yet their records indicate no further changes during this time.

43 Injunctions VI and VII, in ibid. 2:37-8.
44 Cratfield CWA. p.56. The rowell was also known as the ‘common light’.
45 Though they still took the collections they are now called ‘gatherings’ and only note the liturgical day, not the elaborate language of collections for ‘indulgences yielded this day’ as in, for example, 1528-29. This action indicates that the churchwardens were flaunting the eleventh injunction, which stated that any man who was a known ‘fautor [abettor] of the Bishop of Rome’s pretended power’ ought to be reported to the authorities for prosecution, see: Injunction XI in VA1. 2:39; for the collections, see: Mildenhall CWA. pp.77, 84, and fn.185.
Meanwhile, as a result of the Dissolution, two impropriated Suffolk parishes, Mildenhall and Cratfield, lost the patronage of the abbeys at Bury St. Edmunds and St. Neots, respectively. Many impropriated parishes now enjoyed a greater degree of independence, but were also no longer protected by monastic overlords. Looking back at the Cratfield wardens’ early removal of their rowell in 1539, it could be that they felt they had more latitude to act since they were no longer under St. Neots’ authority. Although the Dissolution’s effects could not be undone, its attack on traditional religion soon prompted a conservative correction. Faced with the possibility of being isolated between Catholics and Protestants on the continent and taken aback by the radicalism that had arisen in response to Cromwell’s evangelical policies, Henry VIII encouraged Parliament to pass the conservative Act of Six Articles in 1539. The act reaffirmed transubstantiation, reinstated reception in one kind, upheld the practice of private masses for the dead, and insisted upon clerical celibacy. Despite negative reaction from evangelicals such as Archbishop Cranmer, the Six Articles merely reiterated traditional doctrines and did not undo the policies of 1538. MacCulloch states that technically, they did not ‘overturn a single one of the concrete reforms achieved by Cromwell over the previous decade, and if they affirmed the Eucharistic presence in language which Cranmer would have felt aggressively conservative, they also did no more than affirm the [Lutheran form of] real presence in which he believed [at that time]’.

48 Cratfield was impropriated to St Neots priory in Huntingdonshire, its tithes having been granted to the monastery by Queen Matilda around 1100. This meant that St Neots’ abbot was the rector of the parish and collected its great tithes. He thus had the right to appoint the vicar who carried out priestly duties on his behalf. See: Holland and Raven. Cratfield CWA. pp.10-11. For more on impropriation in Suffolk, see Dymond, D. ‘Vicarages and Appropriated Church Livings’, in Historical Atlas of Suffolk. (Ipswich. 1999) pp.72-3. Likewise, the abbey at Bury St Edmunds had the right to select Mildenhall’s vicar in addition to collecting its tithes. Middleton-Stewart. Mildenhall CWA. p.xxi.

49 Henry was motivated by shifts in political factions at court and personal love interests. His growing dissatisfaction with Cromwell’s approach to reform, plus the intervention of the conservative Duke of Norfolk, probably inspired passage of the Six Articles in June, and eventually led Henry to have Cromwell executed for treason in July 1540. Henry married Catherine Howard on the same day as Cromwell’s execution. All of this signaled a religious and political sea change for several years (1539-43), during which time Henry had many evangelicals executed for denying transubstantiation. Even Cranmer was threatened by conservative attacks at this time, though he survived. See chapter seven ‘Salvaging the Cause: 1539–1542’, in MacCulloch. Cranmer. pp.237-96. For Cromwell’s fall, see Guy, J. Tudor England. (Oxford. 1988) pp.186-89.

50 Bray. Documents. pp.223-4. Earlier drafts of the Six Articles included the word transubstantiation, but the final version omitted it. Alec Ryrie points out that its final wording ‘was virtually a dictionary definition of transubstantiation’. The government had thus attempted to remove a non-scriptural vestige of papal power from the English church and arrive at the same doctrinal formulation on its own. ‘As a result, the complex tradition underpinning established Eucharistic doctrine was being left behind. If traditional forms of doctrinal authority were being questioned, then every scrap of doctrinal territory had to be fought for’. Ryrie, A. The Gospel and Henry VIII: Evangelicals in the Early English Reformation. (Cambridge. 2003) p.36.

51 Cranmer may not have agreed with their language but the Six Articles did not address the Bible order, nor did they add back the holy days purged in 1534. MacCulloch. Cranmer. p.253. I argue that the fifth article did, in fact, muddy the distinction made by the Ten Articles about purgatory and the efficacy of prayers for the dead. For examples of local practices continuing unchanged, see entries for 1539-40 in Boxford CWA. pp.31-5; Mildenhall CWA. p.85.
In yet another twist, a royal proclamation in November 1538 proscribed St. Thomas Becket from the liturgical calendar. The proclamation was a power play, pure and simple. Beckett, the popular medieval martyr-bishop, was the most famous advocate for the church’s freedom from royal interference. Henry’s exclusion of Beckett from the liturgical calendar made it clear who was in charge of the English church. The message must have stuck on some level because in 1539 the Mildenhall churchwardens had Beckett’s name and image erased from their liturgical books. The same folio page for 1539 shows that they also had their Papal indulgences painted over. This was quite a change from one year earlier, when they were still taking collections for the indulgences. Though they had different localised effects, the Six Articles, the 1538 Injunctions, and the royal proclamation proscribing Beckett all illustrate the unsettled nature of Henry VIII’s religious program and the demands it placed on the allegiance of those churchwardens charged with carrying out the orders.

Later Changes and Local (Re)Actions

In May 1541 Henry VIII issued a royal proclamation ordering churches to obtain an English Bible by the feast of All Saints or face a 40s. fine for each month they failed to comply. The fine was thus more than three times the price of a Bible! The incentive seems to have worked because Cratfield and Boxford purchased Bibles in 1541, while Mildenhall purchased a lectern for a Bible they presumably already possessed. The five-year gap from the initial 1536 Injunction shows that, at least in this regard, these Suffolk parishes were no more advanced than many others that had also delayed until 1541. However, the accounts for Tilney suggest a more complex situation; there, wardens paid for frankincense, candles for the Rood, mending a silver pax, a string for a pyx, as well as a lectern for the Bible. This list suggests that parishioners at Tilney continued to observe many traditional liturgical practices while also implementing the new policies.

Meanwhile, the Cratfield accounts for 1541 bear entries for several items suggesting illicit iconoclasm. A glazer was paid for mending windows, which included three pounds of solder and a

53 TRP. 1:296-8.
54 Cratfield CWA. p.58; Boxford CWA. p.37; Mildenhall CWA., p.87, and fn.201.
55 Litzenberger notes a similar tendency in Gloucestershire parishes. See: Reformation and the Laity. p.61.
56 Tilney CWA. pp.158-60. The churchwardens’ accounts for the Suffolk parish of Long Melford are missing for this year, but an inventory made in 1541 does not list a Bible among the church goods; however it does list the same Mass Books as in the 1529 inventory. See: Dymond and Paine. Five Centuries of an English Parish Church. pp.67-93.
bushel of lime ‘spente abowght’ the windows.\textsuperscript{57} Looking at these entries, Ann Nichols believes that ‘a bushel of lime would have been rather too much ‘cementing’ mixture for repair of windows that required only three pounds of solder’.\textsuperscript{58} She suggests that the lime may have been used to white out offending images in the stained glass. There are also entries on the same page for 100 paving tiles. Citing precedents elsewhere, Nichols suggests that this expenditure could be related to a previously unrecorded removal of tabernacles and altars around the church.\textsuperscript{59} If true, these actions in 1541 would have put Cratfield well ahead of the order to remove altars and shrines that came in 1547 with the First Edwardian Injunctions.

It should be noted that sixteen years later, under Mary I in 1557, the Cratfield wardens fetched the same stone slab from the vicarage barn for use once again as the high altar.\textsuperscript{60} The fact that they had hidden it for sixteen years is telling. It is possible that this was merely prudence dictating that a good piece of stone should not go to waste; but it could indicate the existence of a conservative faction within the community that held out hope for a return to traditional religion. Conservatives may have taken similar action in Boxford and Mildenhall, although it is unlikely since both parishes built new stone altars under Mary.\textsuperscript{61} The fact that the Cratfield wardens hid their altar stone leads one to question the motivations behind earlier churchwardens’ actions in 1541. Perhaps they were acting under pressure from an evangelical faction in the parish, or maybe they feared the consequences of disobeying royal orders. We cannot know for sure. However, our case studies show that during this early period of religious change churchwardens were under increasing pressure to interpret and enforce royal policy. This put them in a precarious position, but also allowed them to shape religious practice within their local communities.

For an illustration of Henry VIII’s religious program, the public relations campaign waged to promote it, and its reception at the local level, one ought to examine the title page to the Great Bible, first published in 1539 (Figure 1). First, notice that Jesus Christ, depicted above Henry VIII giving him the Word to distribute, is very small indeed! Just below this scene we see Henry VIII distributing the Bible to Thomas Cranmer and Thomas Cromwell, representing the spiritual and secular lords, respectively. Then we see the Bible making its way down through the Tudor social hierarchy until finally it reaches the common people at the bottom. Notice in the lower scene that the people are not actually reading the Bible, they are hearing it read aloud. This was quite common, since literacy rates

\textsuperscript{57} Cratfield CWA. p.57.  
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid. pp.172-3.  
\textsuperscript{60} Cratfield CWA. p.85.  
\textsuperscript{61} The Boxford accounts do not contain entries for rebuilding altars taken down in 1550, although they must have done so since there is an entry for taking them down again in 1559. Boxford CWA. pp.57-8, 70. Mildenhall also removed its altars in 1550 but did not rebuild the high altar until 1558. Mildenhall CWA. p.136.
were very low at this time. It is interesting to note that the passage being read to them, from I Timothy 2:1-2, instructs the faithful to pray for and obey secular authorities. This was a not very subtle message about loyalty in the face of change. How are the people depicted as reacting to the gracious provision of God’s Word from their king? With grateful cries of ‘Vivat Rex’ and ‘God save the Kynge’. Clearly this is a one-sided and idealised vision of Henry VIII’s English Church, but it is worth asking whether the mood on the ground in local communities was quite as jubilant as this image suggests. Based on the parish case studies reviewed above, one can say with certainty that the situation was surely not this straightforward. In each community there were people on both sides of the theological and political debate and though some were eager for Henry’s ‘reform’ just as many, if not more, were bitterly opposed to it.
Figure 1. Title page of the *Great Bible* (1539)\(^{62}\)

Conclusion

In the end Henry VIII was too much of a traditionalist to be steered entirely to the evangelical cause, but the later years of his reign saw policies enacted that regulated items and practices deemed extrabiblical and superstitious, including the ill defined ‘abuse’ of images. Yet, in January 1546 the evangelical John Hooper lamented to Heinrich Bullinger that: ‘As far as true religion is concerned, idolatry is nowhere in greater vigour. Our king has destroyed the pope, but not popery’. Hooper feared that public worship was still largely unchanged and that many retained superstitions.

Nonetheless, the variations and vagueness in Henry’s religious policies were ripe for exploitation by evangelical iconoclasts and conservative iconophiles alike. Standing between central authorities and the local community parish churchwardens accepted, reinterpreted, and sometimes disobeyed official orders, thus making the Henrician Reformation more radical or more conservative than intended, depending on the time, place, and people involved.

This article has presented contrasting examples of churchwardens destroying religious images and protecting them, both of which were strategies employed in dialogue with Henry VIII’s reformation. More than just reactions to a top-down program of religious change, acts of defiance or compliance were a form of personal and communal performance, through which laypeople expressed their doctrinal sympathies in action rather than learned discourse.

With regard to the wider implications of this subject, there is much to be gained from extending the chronological scope of investigation. While Henry VIII’s unsettled policies allowed for the contrasting local actions recounted in this study, Edward VI’s radical religious program spurred far more instances of iconoclasm and iconophilia, which aggravated mounting doctrinal divisions among the laity and created an almost impossible situation for the churchwardens tasked with implementing often unpopular policies. The consolidation of doctrine and practice later in the sixteenth century, while significant, does not inform these initial expressions of religious agency. Rather, the churchwardens who found themselves on the edge of sacred and secular under Henry VIII ought to be investigated on their own, as models of personal agency at the vanguard of the Tudor Reformations.

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