

Who actually cared for parishioners?

We saw how the work of a diligent priest could be long and hard. We know some rectors had incomes from two benefices. They could not be in two places at once and other incumbents were just plain absent.

So, who did care for the souls of those who lived here in the 1400s?

Many lay people helped with church duties; chief among them was the parish clerk. Part-time and unpaid, the clerk's duties were confined to divine service and did not include pastoral care. He was the organiser.

Churchwardens nominated and supported the clerk but the rector appointed or removed him. Entering holy orders and becoming a deacon, the clerk prepared the church for services. He opened, laid out and collected Mass books; served priest or curate with copes; kindled censers and lit tapers; set the children to sing; renewed the font's holy water and took some every Sunday to the sick. He also kept priests and churchwardens abreast of marriages, christenings and burials. Oh, and he helped the Sexton to ring the bells!

Boys and youths formed the largest proportion of the minor clergy. They sang in the choir and would study, tutored perhaps by the clerk. This way they learned to read, sing Latin and understand the liturgy.

Progressing through holy orders, our clerk could join the ranks of chaplains employed by incumbents. For most men ordained, such parish service was an unavoidable stage. Only graduates like John Blew or the well-connected like Sire Stephen Payn avoided it. For most, chaplaincy was the summit of their career for, in most diocese, there were twice as many chaplains as parishes.

At least the chaplain got pay, sometimes from a sponsor like a monastery. Pay was fixed by law in Henry V's reign to 8 marks a year.

For us, the chaplains are anonymous, their names lost in the mists of time. In social origins, they were men of the people. The church, however, had given them an education and that marked them out.

Though we know the names of prebendaries and rectors, the truth is that, more than anything, local people organised the parish and local people looked after each other's souls.