**The Elizabethan House of Commons and St Stephen’s Chapel Westminster**

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ABSTRACT: This article explores the significance of the Elizabethan House of Commons meeting in a converted royal chapel within the Palace of Westminster. In 1548 the dissolved collegiate chapel of St Stephen at Westminster was given over to the exclusive use of the Commons, providing MPs with a dedicated meeting-space for the first time. Although a great deal has been written about Elizabethan parliaments, little attention has been paid to the physical spaces within which MPs gathered, debated and legislated. Drawing on parliamentary diaries and Exchequer records and informed by digital reconstructions of the Commons chamber modelled by the St Stephen’s chapel project at the University of York, this article argues for the enduring influence of the architecture and decoration of the medieval chapel on the procedure, culture, ritual, and self-awareness of the Elizabethan House of Commons. Famously likened to a theatre by the MP and writer on parliamentary procedure John Hooker, the Commons chamber is analysed as a space in which parliamentary speeches were performed and disrupted. The sound of debate is contrasted with other kinds of noise including scoffing and laughter, disruptive coughing, and prayers led by the clerk and the Speaker of the Commons. The iconography of the chamber, including the royal arms above the Speaker’s chair and the mace carried by the serjeant at arms, is interpreted as enabling a culture of counsel and debate as much as an assertion of monarchical power. Evidence is also presented for the Commons chamber as a site of political memory.

KEYWORDS: House of Commons; palace of Westminster; St Stephen’s chapel; debate; voting; prayer; memory; royal arms; Speaker of the Commons; serjeant at arms

The parliaments of Elizabeth I’s reign have long been identified as a key moment in the development of the House of Commons. Lively debates about the religious settlement and the succession to the throne brought the mysteries of state into the public domain, sparking the Queen to complain that ‘Parlyment matters was the common table talk at ordinaryes, which was a thing against the dignitie of the Howse’.[[1]](#endnote-1) Petitions from MPs pointing out Elizabeth’s responsibility to marry, or demanding the execution of Mary Stuart, seemed to cut into the royal prerogative. The Elizabethan Commons heard some remarkable speeches, whether Sir Walter Mildmay on the ‘swarming hither of popish preists and monkish Jesuites’, or member for Barnstaple Richard Martin condemning monopoly suppliers as ‘these bloodsuckers of the commonwealth’.[[2]](#endnote-2) By any measure this was a remarkable generation of MPs: noisy and articulate, challenging traditional boundaries of the acceptable in politics, balancing their loyalty to God, crown and nation with their responsibilities to their local communities. The Queen might exchange conventional courtesies with the Speaker at the opening of parliament, but she also harangued the Commons as ‘unbrydelyd parsons whose hedes were nevere snaffled by the rydere’ when her blood was up.[[3]](#endnote-3)

The Elizabethan Commons has been the subject of intense scrutiny from some of the best-known historians to work on this period, with much attendant controversy and counter-argument. And yet this formidable array of scholarship has had surprisingly little to say about the Commons as a place, namely the former royal and collegiate chapel of St Stephen acquired in 1548 and adapted for the exclusive use of MPs, as distinct from a legislative powerhouse or ‘the premier point of contact between rulers and ruled’.[[4]](#endnote-4) Certainly, Edward VI’s modification of the former royal chapel at Westminster as a home for the Commons has been noted by parliamentary historians, indeed elevated into a turning point: David Dean describes the move into St Stephen’s chapel as ‘one of the most significant developments in the history of parliament’.[[5]](#endnote-5) However, the reasons why this should be the case have not been fully thought through. Claims that St Stephen’s ‘immediately gave a distinctive tone to the Commons’ proceedings and determined much of how the House did its business’, as one recent study of parliament puts it, need to be substantiated.[[6]](#endnote-6)

In pursuing this theme, innovation must be balanced with continuity. The Commons had a long history of meeting at Westminster, albeit in borrowed rather than dedicated space: the Painted Chamber within the palace in the 14th century, and more recently in the refectory of the Abbey.[[7]](#endnote-7) The proceedings of the Commons were also of some antiquity, documented in texts including the 14th-century *Modus Tenendi Parliamentum* as glossed and printed by the Elizabethan antiquary and MP John Hooker in 1572.[[8]](#endnote-8) Attributing procedural development to the move into St Stephen’s is not straightforward, and cannot simply be assumed. For instance the custom of voting by division, sometimes associated with the new chamber, was first recorded in the 1523 parliament meeting at Blackfriars; it could be older than that.[[9]](#endnote-9)

And yet there can be no doubt that meeting in a converted royal chapel, at the junction between the public and ‘privy’ spaces of the palace of Westminster, gave a distinct architectural context to the political culture of the elected house of parliament. New practices developed, and existing trends were accelerated or given greater solidity by the inherited space of St Stephen’s. The identity of being a member of the Commons was likewise inflected by the new meeting place. Its function may have changed, but St Stephen’s remained royal space. MPs had acquired their own premises more as tenants than owner-occupiers. The iconography and ceremony which surrounded them made it clear that Westminster remained a palace, even if no longer habitually inhabited by the sovereign. The famous conflicts (if conflicts they were) between Elizabeth and her parliaments took place within one of the Queen’s houses. That did not mean that MPs were quiescent; there is much evidence to the contrary. But it did supply an architectural backdrop to the relationship between crown and Commons, of which MPs would have been acutely aware and which needs to be factored into our understanding of Elizabethan politics.

This article considers themes of space and sound in the Elizabethan House of Commons, informed by the research and digital modelling conducted by the St Stephen’s chapel AHRC-funded project at the University of York.[[10]](#endnote-10) How much did it matter that, unlike the parliaments of Henry VIII’s reign, the elected knights and burgesses now had a home of their own? In what ways did the converted space of St Stephen’s chapel influence the development of parliamentary procedure, or the ritual which regulated the rhythm of the Commons, or the experience of being a member of parliament? Do the architecture and geography of the palace of Westminster have any significant bearing on the vexed question of the institutional maturity and self-awareness of the Elizabethan Commons? Analysed in project meetings and study days with the History of Parliament Trust, these questions have been further refined by the Virtual St Stephen’s 3D modelling of the chapel and Commons chamber which has run in parallel with the archival work of the project. This article represents an attempt to distil the results of a collaborative set of research processes, and to bring them into conversation with a historical debate on Elizabethan parliaments which has lost some of its impetus in recent years. In short, it seeks to restore both space and sound to the Elizabethan House of Commons, be that formal debate, laughter and scoffing, or prayer.

The following discussion is divided into three sections. The historiography of later 16th-century parliaments is full and contested, offering sometimes diametrically opposed interpretations of essentially similar sources. Having introduced St Stephen’s chapel itself, the first section of this article identifies key features of these debates in order to make a case for closer scrutiny of the architectural environment in which Elizabethan MPs came together. The spaces of St Stephen’s chapel, their modification for use as a chamber and lobby for the Commons and the influence of the building upon parliamentary procedure and the culture of debate, form the subject of the second section. John Hooker’s description of the Commons as ‘made like a Theater’ is well-known among parliamentary historians, but until now it has been difficult to visualise owing to the absence of any depictions of the interior of the chamber before the 1620s (and even this evidence needs to be questioned). The digital reconstruction of a Commons chamber which Hooker might have recognised, modelled by the St Stephen’s project team from a range of manuscript, architectural and visual data, offers a new tool to historians seeking to understand the lower house as a functioning institution and place of assembly as distinct from a collective biography of MPs. The St Stephen’s visualizations are freely available on the web, underpinning and complementing the argument of this article.[[11]](#endnote-11)

By highlighting key features of the chamber including the Speaker’s chair and the royal arms, the digital model can also inform discussion of symbolism and ceremony in the Commons. Influenced by art history and textual studies, historians of Tudor political culture have become ever more alert to the importance of ritual and representations of power. Efforts to apply this methodology to parliament, however, have been sporadic and focused more on the upper than the lower house. The third section of this article reflects on symbol and ritual in the Elizabethan Commons, the prominence of royal iconography and the practice of prayer within the chamber, in order to cast light on the common life and collective identity of Elizabethan members of parliament. Most importantly, evidence will be presented in support of the contention, present in the existing scholarly literature but hitherto not fully explored, that the relocation of the Commons to St Stephen’s chapel had profound political consequences which played out during Elizabeth I’s reign. St Stephen’s was no longer sacred space, but visual traces of its former use could still be seen. Just as important were the royal connotations of the building, both the former chapel itself and the wider palace of Westminster. Exploring space and sound in the Elizabethan House of Commons enables a subtler understanding of the parliamentary politics of a period often seen as crucial in its constitutional significance.

*Locating Elizabethan parliaments*

Founded by Edward I in 1292 but not fully furnished until late in Edward III’s reign, St Stephen’s Westminster was the most splendid royal chapel in the king’s principal residence in the capital.[[12]](#endnote-12) Built at a right-angle to Westminster Hall at its south-east corner and facing east across the river, St Stephen’s chapel was made up of five richly-decorated bays, surmounted by a clerestory and topped with a timber vault. A sequence of exceptional wall-paintings mingled biblical scenes from the books of Job and Tobit with royal and noble heraldry. A depiction of St George presenting King Edward III to the Virgin and Child appeared next to the altar. In 1348 a college of dean, canons, vicars and lay clerks was endowed to serve the chapel, requiring the insertion of choir stalls and a substantial pulpitum or screen to divide the space reserved for the college and royal family from the more public western part of St Stephen’s; the second of these features would be an important influence on the post-dissolution use of the chapel as the Commons chamber. Stonework in the royal colours of red and blue was complemented by Purbeck marble which had been highly polished to reflect candlelight. The precise relationship between the two buildings is disputed by art historians, but St Stephen’s chapel has often been seen as a response to the Sainte-Chapelle in Paris, a ‘life-sized reliquary’ for the Crown of Thorns relic owned by Louis XI. Within England it became widely recognised as ‘a benchmark of architectural grandeur’, closely associated with royal power.[[13]](#endnote-13) As a choral foundation, St Stephen’s shared responsibility with the chapel royal for the liturgical cycle of masses and prayers for the royal dead maintained by the Plantagenet and early Tudor monarchy.[[14]](#endnote-14) That the acoustics of St Stephen’s chapel were designed for sacred polyphony more than speech-making is a factor which needs to be taken into account in our understanding of space and sound in the Elizabethan Commons.[[15]](#endnote-15)

Like the Sainte-Chapelle, St Stephen’s was a two-storey structure: a loftily magnificent upper chapel dedicated to St Stephen protomartyr (where the royal family and elite visitors had worshipped, converted to become the House of Commons in 1548 and destroyed in the fire which consumed the old palace of Westminster in 1834), and a lower chapel dedicated to the Virgin Mary (which partially survived the 1834 fire and was restored as a chapel by Edward Barry, now known as St Mary Undercroft). The distinctive double height of St Stephen’s chapel is captured in two near-contemporary views across the river: one by the Flemish topographical artist Anthonis van den Wyngaerde dating from c. 1544, the other provisionally attributed to Lucas Cornelis de Kock and currently split into two sections owned by the Victoria & Albert Museum and the Louvre.[[16]](#endnote-16) These drawings show St Stephen’s to be a landmark on the Westminster skyline, instantly identifiable and particularly impressive from the river. At around 116 feet (35.35m) to the parapet of the east gable, it stood a good fifteen feet higher than the roof of Westminster Hall.[[17]](#endnote-17) Its painted windows were replaced with clear glass on the dissolution of the college, further modified by a ‘penthouse’ or awning in 1621 to reduce the glare of the morning sun (the Commons met mainly in the mornings), but otherwise the exterior of St Stephen’s was not very significantly altered until the clerestory was removed by Christopher Wren in 1692. To Elizabethan MPs approaching across Old Palace Yard or disembarking at one of the landing stages along the river, the Commons would have presented itself as an obviously medieval building, symbolic of the antiquity of the lower house even if its occupation of this space dated only from Edward VI’s reign.

If there has been comparatively little discussion of questions of space and sound within the Elizabethan House of Commons, then the broader history of the institution hardly qualifies as a neglected topic. The thirteen sessions of parliament under Queen Elizabeth have been a focus of scholarly interest ever since Sir Simonds D’Ewes borrowed from the clerk of the Commons ‘one of the original journal-books of Parliaments of that House in Queen Elizabeth’s time’ in order to compile his own account, complete by 1637 and published by his nephew Paul Bowes in 1682.[[18]](#endnote-18) The modern historiography has gone through several waves of interpretation and revision since John Neale conceptualised the debate about Elizabethan parliaments as a series of encounters between the Commons and the monarchy. Neale’s influential book *The Elizabethan House of Commons* appeared in 1949, aiming to analyse the institution at work during what he characterised as a ‘crucial stage’ in the history of the Commons. Two further studies of Queen Elizabeth and the Commons had followed by 1957, and Neale’s research also fed into the biographical survey of Elizabethan MPs published in three volumes by the History of Parliament Trust in 1981. Where is the Commons chamber in all of this?

Aimed at the general as much as the academic reader but drawing on deep knowledge of local and national archives nonetheless, Neale’s *The Elizabethan House of Commons* has three pages on St Stephen’s Chapel, in chapter 19. The narrative is framed in an interesting way. Interpreting a description of the lower house in John Hooker’s *The Order and Usage How to Keepe a Parlement in England*, Neale likened the seating arrangements in the 16th-century House of Commons to practice in the modern-day British parliament. Neale described a ‘front government bench’ on the Speaker’s right, a ‘front opposition bench’ on his left: a ‘strikingly familiar’ basic setting, ‘unchanged through the centuries’.[[19]](#endnote-19) In the seminal modern study of Elizabethan parliaments, we appear to have an informed argument that the move into St Stephen’s was a significant step along the way towards modern-day parliamentary practice. The problem is that Neale slightly mis-quotes his source John Hooker, who actually describes the privy council and other chief officers of the crown sitting ‘Upon the lower rowe on bothe sides [of] the Speaker’, thus facing each other rather than sitting together.[[20]](#endnote-20) Proximity to the Speaker’s chair was clearly a marker of political and social status, hence the councillors and household officers arranged on either side. Writing in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Patrick Collinson noted what he calls Neale’s ‘instinct… to look for the first shoots of the modern parliamentary constitution’; we see that instinct represented here.[[21]](#endnote-21)

One of John Neale’s pupils was Geoffrey Elton, also destined to write a formidable amount on the subject of Tudor parliaments. Elton’s own entry in *Oxford DNB*, similarly written by Patrick Collinson, describes the ‘almost obsessional vendetta’ which he conducted against John Neale. Elton moved firmly onto his former tutor’s territory in his final book *The Parliament of England 1559-1581*, and he came to a ‘drastically different’ set of conclusions about a House of Commons that Neale had characterised as rising on a wave of puritan opposition to the crown. Elton used the Elizabethan History of Parliament volumes, which Neale had inspired, to prove that ‘the puritan choir is a myth and should be removed from the annals of history’.[[22]](#endnote-22) He did not, however, have anything significant to say about the Commons chamber.

Building on the work of both Neale and Elton, Jennifer Loach’s monograph on Tudor parliaments observed that ‘the layout of [St Stephen’s], and, in particular, of its antechamber, was to have an important effect on the way in which procedure developed in the Lower House’, notably the way in which voting took place. Loach’s opinion is telling given her expertise on the subject, but regrettably she took the point no further.[[23]](#endnote-23) Considerably richer in architectural detail is Alasdair Hawkyard’s exploration of the meeting places of the Commons since the 14th century and the procedures that developed within them. Hawkyard suggests, for instance, that the tiered seating visible in the earliest visual sources for the Commons interior had a precedent in temporary structures installed in the chapter house of Westminster Abbey when the Commons assembled there for the Good Parliament of 1376.[[24]](#endnote-24) Work by David Dean on the practice of lobbying within the Commons, and Norman Jones on numerous aspects of parliamentary culture, similarly invites questions about the physical spaces of, and patterns of movement within, Parliament.[[25]](#endnote-25) The St Stephen’s Chapel project offers an opportunity to locate this body of research within a fuller understanding of the topography of the Elizabethan Commons chamber and the wider palace of Westminster. Bringing together an edited collection on Elizabethan parliaments, Dean and Jones explained how the book arose from their ‘conviction that the Elizabethan parliament needed to be located in its context, identifying what it did and how it did it’.[[26]](#endnote-26) To that agenda we can now add, *where* it did it.

There is another justification for reviving the debate about the Elizabethan House of Commons. Early modern political historians have grown steadily more confident about interpreting representations of power, whether the ritual of the royal court, preaching at Paul’s Cross and in parish churches, the architecture of great houses and town halls, or civic ceremonial in London and other urban centres. Parliament naturally lends itself to analysis as a theatre. It was in precisely these terms that John Hooker described the House of Commons in 1572, and even Elton referred to the Commons as a ‘stage for political argument and general debate’.[[27]](#endnote-27) Elizabethan historians can take inspiration from colleagues studying the 17th century who have engaged more directly with this aspect of the political culture of the Commons. For Chris Kyle, parliament in the 1620s was ‘an auditorium as vigorous and dynamic as any playhouse’, ‘preeminently a place of performance’.[[28]](#endnote-28) The palace of Westminster has been likened to ‘a seventeenth century tourist attraction’, the Hall in particular drawing large crowds to witness ‘spectacles’ such as state trials or royal speeches.[[29]](#endnote-29) If the Elizabethan Commons also qualifies as a stage, then we need more of an understanding of backdrop and props as well as players.

*St Stephen’s Chapel as the Commons chamber*

St Stephen’s college was dissolved under the provisions of the second Chantries Act in 1547, the speed of its fall implying it may have been a test case for the government of Edward VI.[[30]](#endnote-30) Surveyor of the royal works Lawrence Bradshaw was authorised to spend £15 14*s.* on ‘sondry charges made & done in & upon the P[ar]lyament house at Westm[inster] some tyme Saynt Stephens Chapell’ in January 1548, before the Easter date when the king was formally empowered to take possession of properties dissolved under the Act. Hawkyard concludes that the chapel had been ‘designated in advance for the Commons’ use’ as its ‘permanent home’, and that MPs moved into St Stephen’s in November 1548 for the second session of Edward VI’s first parliament.[[31]](#endnote-31) Given the sum spent, the preparation of the chapel for its new role can have been rudimentary at best: perhaps an experiment. If so then it was clearly successful, because within a year the crown was spending much larger sums to create a chamber that could accommodate several hundred MPs.

Whether St Stephen’s was intended to be a ‘permanent’ new home for the Commons is a moot point. The lord chancellor directed the Commons to choose their Speaker ‘at their accustomed Place’ when Edward VI’s second parliament opened in March 1553, implying there may already have been a degree of association between the institution and the building.[[32]](#endnote-32) Set against this is the fact that Queen Mary initially planned to summon her own second parliament to Oxford in February 1554, perhaps out of queasiness that her Commons should assemble in a plundered Catholic chapel; the substantial sum of £116 17*s*. 2½*d*. was spent readying Christ Church ‘and other places’ beforeparliament reverted to Westminster.[[33]](#endnote-33) In August 1625 the Commons relocated to Oxford’s Divinity School, and Oxford would host the parliament summoned by King Charles I in 1644. Practice did sometimes vary in Elizabeth’s reign, for instance the use of the Lesser or White Hall instead of the House for the practical ceremony of taking the roll-call of MPs arriving in November 1584: ‘not befor so used’, as Thomas Cromwell noted in his journal.[[34]](#endnote-34) But the debating chamber itself remained in St Stephen’s, the growing solidity of its fixtures and fittings contrasting with the temporary structures installed in previous meeting places and serving as a reminder of the Commons’ existence even when parliament was not in session. Payments to the serjeant imply that the royal arms above the Speaker’s chair were removed for safe-keeping when parliament was prorogued or dissolved, but other features remained in place: presumably the Speaker’s chair and the clerks’ table, certainly the distinctive tiers of seating for members.[[35]](#endnote-35) Given its proximity to the public space of Westminster Hall and the accessibility of the lobby located in the former outer chapel of St Stephen, it is not unlikely that the curious could have gained access to the chamber when parliament wasn’t in session, for a fee to the serjeant or the keeper of the palace. Hooker explains that no-one ‘beeing not one of the Parlament house: ought to enter or come within the house, as long as the sitting is there’, leaving open the possibility of access at other times.[[36]](#endnote-36) Visiting Westminster in 1598, the German traveller Paul Hentzner seems to have been describing the Commons rather than the Lords when he refers to seats and wainscot of Irish wood ‘in the chamber where the parliament is usually held’.[[37]](#endnote-37)

As a college and chapel closed down by the dissolution of the chantries, St Stephen’s fits into a broader pattern of the recycling of monastic and other ecclesiastical buildings made redundant by the religious reformations of Henry VIII and Edward VI. Maurice Howard has estimated that as many as half of the former monastic buildings in England may have been put to new use, even if their collective contribution to architectural development has not been fully appreciated.[[38]](#endnote-38) In the case of St Stephen’s, this process of adaptation invites questions about the fate of its sumptuous decoration and fabric. Did any of the furnishings of the former chapel remain in place? The altar coverings of crimson velvet and cloth of gold, devotional images made of silver and elaborate red and blue hangings in the quire were all carefully inventoried before being removed, despite the persistent myth in the modern palace of Westminster that the altar itself somehow remained in place, hence the culture of MPs bowing as they enter the chamber; inconceivable for a House of Commons spearheading the Reformation of Edward VI.[[39]](#endnote-39)

Interest has also focused on the choir stalls of St Stephen’s, on the assumption that the antiphonal singing of the medieval chapel was somehow echoed in oppositional debate across the aisle of the Commons. One recent account asserts that the stalls ‘were at once used by the opposing sides of Parliament without alteration to the ecclesiastical layout, thus instituting the traditional plan of the Commons’ Chamber down to the present time’, a claim also upheld on the Living Heritage pages of the UK Parliament website.[[40]](#endnote-40) Quite apart from the question about what ‘opposing sides of Parliament’ might mean in this period, this interpretation of the evidence cannot be correct. At full strength (as it was on the eve of the Reformation) the college of St Stephen numbered twelve canons and thirteen vicars, supplemented by four lay clerks and seven choristers.[[41]](#endnote-41) At Elizabeth’s accession the Commons stood at 398, its rapid recent growth attributable to the admission of Welsh MPs and the vigorous enfranchisement of boroughs under Edward and Mary. The disparity in numbers is obvious: the Commons exceeded the canons by a factor of ten. For the former chapel space to function in its new role, the choir stalls must have been replaced with tiered seating as part of the £344 16*s.* 10½*d*. spent to convert the upper chapel as summarised in Lawrence Bradshaw’s retrospective account for 1549-50. A further £18 12*s*. 2¼*d*. was spent on the new House of Commons in Edward’s reign and £63 15*s*. 1*d*. under Philip and Mary, presumably maintenance and readying of the chamber rather than significant further modification.[[42]](#endnote-42)

Reporting on the opening of Elizabeth’s first parliament in January 1559, the Venetian ambassador likened the Commons chamber to a ‘theatre’. The same description was expanded by John Hooker, who described the chamber as ‘made like a Theater, having foure rowes of seates one aboove an other ro[u]nd about the same’.[[43]](#endnote-43) James Burbage’s pioneering theatre in Shoreditch dates from 1576, four years after the publication of the *Order and Usage*; Hooker may instead have been thinking of the temporary wooden scaffold known as a *theatrum* constructed in St Mary’s in Oxford for the academic disputations held annually in the church.[[44]](#endnote-44) Even with the provision of tiered seating, the new Commons chamber was too small to seat all the elected members at one time – one feature that the first dedicated House of Commons arguably has bequeathed to its modern successor.[[45]](#endnote-45) Hawkyard contends that the location of the royal pew in the medieval chapel has a bearing on the location of the government front bench in the modern parliament, to the Speaker’s right: ‘the original choice of these seats by ministers was determined by their awareness of the exact location occupied by Plantagenet and Tudor kings when worshipping in the chapel’. But this may be too much of an argument for continuity. As we have seen, Hooker described the chief officers of the crown sitting on both sides of the Speaker, and by the time that ‘government leaders’ developed in anything like the modern sense the location of the royal stall would long have been forgotten.[[46]](#endnote-46)

The new chamber measured some 62’5” (19.04m) in length and 32’2” (9.8m) in width according to the most recent calculations, appreciably smaller than the refectory of Westminster Abbey where the Commons had usually met during the 15th and earlier 16th centuries.[[47]](#endnote-47) The height is more difficult to estimate, depending on assumptions about the installation of a ceiling below the original vaulting of the chapel. Bradshaw’s accounts are insufficiently detailed to determine whether a ceiling was added as part of the initial conversion from 1548, although the sums spent were on a scale that this is certainly a possibility. A ceiling would have improved the acoustics of the chamber as well as making the space more comfortable to inhabit, in keeping with the secularisation and domestication of equivalent ecclesiastical buildings. It could also have created a convenient space for the storage of the parliamentary papers which were being generated in increasing quantities. In 1552-3 Bradshaw made account of the £39 19*s*. 6*d*. spent ‘for saffe kepinge the Recordes’ in the parliament house, which since 1547 would have included the Commons Journal; a reference in 1597-8 indicates that the papers were by then stored high in the structure of the former chapel.[[48]](#endnote-48) By 1585 a ceiling was certainly in place, since it was repaired and whitewashed in that year.[[49]](#endnote-49) The Virtual St Stephen’s reconstructions opt for a ceiling from the outset, modelling the chamber at 27’5” (8.37m) in height. The alternative is that the Commons initially remained open to the vault of the roof, in which case MPs would have had a view of a fine timber construction of ribs and bosses, brightly painted and spangled with stars.

How did debate function within the inherited space of St Stephen’s chapel? The journals and diaries kept by Elizabethan MPs are frustratingly thin on specific details of the architecture or acoustics of the chamber, but there is some indicative evidence. Sir Henry Unton’s speech on the subsidy in March 1593 was ‘farr of[f]’ and evidently difficult for the journal writer to hear, while Sir Walter Raleigh’s intervention two days earlier regarding a conference with the Lords was repeated by the Speaker ‘because it might be the better heard’: whether on genuine grounds of audibility or for political emphasis is unclear.[[50]](#endnote-50) The authority on parliamentary procedure William Hakewill describes the clerk straining to hear the names of committee members shouted out through the ‘confusion’.[[51]](#endnote-51) A crowd of MPs standing waiting for a seat ‘breedes a confused sound’, as serjeant-at-law Thomas Harris complained in 1601.[[52]](#endnote-52) Members also talked amongst themselves, earning them a rebuke from Speaker Edward Coke: ‘Mr Speaker, perceavinge some men to use private speeches together, said it was not the manner of the Howse that any should whisper or talke secrettly, for her[e] only publique speeches are to be used’.[[53]](#endnote-53) Peter Wentworth’s readmission to the Commons following his imprisonment for his celebrated 1576 oration on freedom of speech was excused by Sir Walter Mildmay on grounds that his words had been spoken not ‘by any comon person abrode, but by a member of this Howse, and not in any private or secrett place, but openly in this most honorable assembly of the parliament being the highest court and councell of the realme’.[[54]](#endnote-54) Rank, age and experience were all factors in being granted leave to speak, but others also had their turn: as a younger member ‘from the upper end of the Howse’ put it, ‘It is and hath bene allwaies the manner of this House to allowe a mixture in speaking, and after the grave, honnorable, and wisest to heare the meanest alsoe’.[[55]](#endnote-55)

Discontent with proceedings could be registered with other kinds of noise: ‘murmure’, theatrical coughing, throat-clearing and laughter. When James Dalton rose to speak against James Morice’s attack on the court of high commission in February 1593, arguing that Morice’s objective was ‘the maynteyning of puritanes in their impure opinions, and breache of all good orders’, he was hit with a barrage of sound: ‘it was straunge and shamefull to see’, wrote the diarist who recorded the event, ‘howe a nomber of the House without all modestie or discretion coughed and hauked, of purpose to putt him out’.[[56]](#endnote-56) Arthur Hall’s argument against the death sentence for the Duke of Norfolk in 1572 had similarly been met by ‘a great murmor, spitting, and coughing’.[[57]](#endnote-57) The cramped conditions in the chamber, the lack of air and sanitation, the competition for a seat and for space for the table-desks and writing implements which some MPs brought with them to take notes, must all have contributed to the heated atmosphere.[[58]](#endnote-58) Although numbers in the chamber could be thinned by absenteeism, at other times the House was packed. A division called on 3 March 1593 recorded that 434 members were present in the House, not far short of a full complement and too many for everyone to sit.[[59]](#endnote-59) A show of humour could still bring MPs together: when the member for Boston prefaced a speech on subsidies with the declaration that ‘I no more meant to speake in this matter then I did to bidd yow all to breakefast’, he was rewarded with a ‘generall laughing’.[[60]](#endnote-60) But laughter could also be more aggressive, provoking an irritated reaction from William Fleetwood in 1585: ‘Do yow laughte? Laught not at me no more then I do at yow. Yow dele uncivilly with me, it is yow allwayes ther in that corner of the Howse’.[[61]](#endnote-61) Fleetwood’s words imply that groups of MPs habitually sat together, in this case presumably at the western end of the chamber furthest from his own privileged position (as recorder of London) near the Speaker; similar complaints about the rowdiness of the gallery would be made in the early 17th century. On occasion the House could be surprised into silence, as when Paul Wentworth cut through lengthy speeches on the fate of Mary Queen of Scots in May 1572 by requesting it be put to the question ‘whither wee should call for an axe or an acte’.[[62]](#endnote-62) At the opening of the 1593 parliament the door to the Lords remained closed some way into the lord keeper’s oration, at which members of the Commons ‘murmured so loude that the noise came to her Majestie’s hearing, who presentlie commaunded the dore to be lett openn, which was done’.[[63]](#endnote-63)

There was one particular feature of the former St Stephen’s Chapel that survived the building’s transformation after 1548, and had an important influence on parliamentary procedure thereafter. When MPs filed into the chamber or divided for a formal vote, they passed through a structure which offers the clearest connection between the topography of the medieval chapel and the post-Reformation House of Commons. In 1348 a timber pulpitum was constructed to screen the dean and canons of St Stephen and any elite visitors from other worshippers in the chapel. This was a substantial architectural feature, twelve feet deep (based on Henry VI’s stipulations for Eton College, which copied the St Stephen’s pulpitum) and incorporating an internal stair to enable access to the rood and presumably to the organ listed in the 1548 inventory. While there is no explicit evidence, the likelihood is that the pulpitum was adapted rather than removed; inner and outer chapel thus becoming Commons chamber and lobby respectively. The distinction between the two spaces is clear in Hooker’s account:

Without this house: is one other in which the under Clarks doo sit, as also such as be Suters and attenda[n]t to that house, and when so ever the house is devided upon any Bil: then the rowme is voided, and the one parte of the house commeth down into this to be numbred.[[64]](#endnote-64)

Working back from architectural plans of the early 19th century, where the dividing line between the Commons chamber and the lobby is clearly marked, the Virtual St Stephen’s reconstruction places the west side of the screen on a line with the east wall of the lobby, enabling the pulpitum to fit between the second and third bays of the 14th-century chapel. How it was converted we cannot tell, beyond the removal of the rood and the altars in the former outer chapel, but the fact that it was made of wood rather than stone would have made the pulpitum quicker and cheaper to adapt. The lobby was roofed, logically at the same time that the Commons chamber got its ceiling, creating upstairs spaces for a committee chamber and a room for the serjeant where offending members or unauthorised intruders could be committed to ward until the House decided what to do with them.[[65]](#endnote-65)

Hooker’s evidence demonstrates how the inherited space of St Stephen’s chapel confirmed the practice of voting by division. On the third reading of a bill, the Speaker invited members to voice their opinion ‘yea’ or ‘no’. If the outcome proved difficult to determine, as it did in 1581 when the motion to hold a sermon every morning and a public fast was finely balanced,

the[n] must a devision be made of the house, and the affirmative parte must arise, & departe into the utter rowme, which (by the Sergeant) is voided before hand of all persons that were there, and then the Speaker must assigne two or foure to number them first which sit within, & then the other which be without, as they doo come in, one by one.[[66]](#endnote-66)

Anyone familiar with the modern British parliament will recognise similarities with the practice that Hooker describes, albeit with a single door in the pulpitum rather than the two division lobbies in the current houses of parliament.[[67]](#endnote-67) The principle of those in favour of a change in the law being required to leave the chamber was explained by an anonymous commentator: ‘they must sitt still that hold the old law still, that as they would kepe the possession of the law, so, their places’.[[68]](#endnote-68) The sense of uncertainty that a member entering the lobby would be able to regain his seat seems to have acted as a disincentive to voting in the affirmative when divisions were called, and indeed the question whether supporters or opponents of a bill should rise from their seats was itself a subject for debate.[[69]](#endnote-69) Social rank also played a role in the practice of voting. The privy councillors, members of the royal household and citizens of London and York whom Hooker describes as occupying the ‘lower rowe’ enjoyed their seats by privilege of their position, but others had to shift for themselves. Peter Wentworth, meanwhile, criticised his colleagues who stayed seated in spite of their earnest speeches because ‘it was comon policy in this Howse to marke the best sorte of the same and either to sitt or arise with them’. Wentworth wanted this craven practice banished: members should ‘rise or sitt as the matter giveth cause, for the eyes of the Lord behold all the earth’.[[70]](#endnote-70)

The re-ordered pulpitum was not the only visual reminder of the medieval past in the Elizabethan Commons. The statues of the twelve Apostles in the image brackets on the main piers survived until 1641, albeit in defaced form: a lasting symbol of the Reformation in a chamber so often focused on questions of religion. The medieval chapel had been an extraordinarily opulent display of colour and heraldry, including tens of thousands of foils of gold leaf. According to the antiquary Frederick Mackenzie, who saw the shell of St Stephen’s after it was gutted in the fire of 1834, almost every part of it had once been painted. The architect George Gilbert Scott had a similar recollection, describing St Stephen’s ‘glowing with the scorched but quite intelligible remnants of its gorgeous decorative colouring’.[[71]](#endnote-71) John Carter’s watercolours of the chapel, commissioned by the Society of Antiquaries in the 1790s, demonstrate how much more paint had survived until the destructive renovations of James Wyatt to make way for Irish members in 1800. Much of this decoration had probably been hidden by wainscot panelling (hence its preservation), and tapestries may also have hung in the Commons as they did in the Lords. But some imagery evidently did remain visible to Elizabethan MPs. On 12 December 1601, the parliamentary diarist Hayward Townshend rose to his feet in support of an act ‘ffore redresse of certayne abusees and deceiptes used in paynetinge’, involving a dispute between the plasterers and the painter-stainers company. Recalling a statute of Edward III’s reign (in truth selectively recalling it), Townshend concluded his speech with an appeal to the heraldry apparently still visible in St Stephen’s: ‘These walles thus curiouslye paynted in fformer agees, the armes soe arteficyallie drawne, the imagerye soe perfectlye done, doe witnesse our fforeffathers’ care in cherisheinge this arte of paynteinge.’[[72]](#endnote-72) Whitewash was purchased at various points; in the Exchequer account for 1565-7, for instance, there is a reference to ‘whyting and plaistering both the houses’.[[73]](#endnote-73) However, recent pigment analysis of surviving stonework from St Stephen’s in the British Museum has revealed no trace of whitewash.

*Symbol and ritual in the Elizabethan Commons*

In an incidental comment, the parliamentary historian Michael Graves proposed that the physical shift into St Stephen’s ‘in some sense symbolised, belatedly, the arrival of the Commons as a co-equal member of a bicameral Parliament’.[[74]](#endnote-74) Symbolised to whom? Presumably not to the monarch, whose opening and closing speeches (delivered in the ‘parliament chamber’ or House of Lords to the seated nobility and bishops, representatives of the Commons standing at the back) remained strongly hierarchical.[[75]](#endnote-75) Perhaps to the upper house – though the Lords were alert to any perceived lack of respect from the Commons, as witnessed in March 1576 when a delegation of MPs was made to wait in the outer part of the parliament chamber before the Lords emerged to sit at a table and vent their frustration that ‘the comon howse did not use that reverence towardes them as they ought to do’. In the Commons’ subtly-crafted response to the Lords, however, the spirit that Graves is describing can indeed be detected. Acknowledging ‘with all humbleness’ the social superiority of the Lords, MPs countered that ‘they would yeild unto their lordshipps all duetifull reverence so farr as the same were not preiudiciall to the libertyes of their Howse, which yt behoved them to leave to their posterity in the same freedome they received them’.[[76]](#endnote-76) The message was clear: in its privileges and powers, the ‘nether house’ (as often termed in documents originating in the Commons, as distinct from ‘common’ or ‘lower’) was a court of equal standing to the upper house.[[77]](#endnote-77)

The same claim was at work in Hooker’s *Order and Usage*. Putting his case that in parliament ‘the oppinion, censure and judgement of a mean Burgesse: is of as great avail: as is the best Lords’, Hooker cited historical precedent and some inventive etymology in support of his position:

The Lords and Commons (in times past) did sit all in one house, but for the advoiding of confusion: they be now devided into twoo severall houses, and yet nevertheles they are of like and equall authoritie, every perso[n] of either of the said houses beeing named, reputed, & cou[n]ted a peer of the Realme, for the time of the Parlement, that is to say, equall, for Par, is equall.[[78]](#endnote-78)

Notwithstanding Hooker’s optimistic reading, whether the Commons occupied their position as of right or by grace of the monarch was never fully put to the test during Elizabeth’s reign, even if numerous speeches circled around the issue. Parliaments were irregular, summoned at the monarch’s will and sometimes of short duration. Yet the Commons was also an ancient institution, peopled by lawyers and antiquaries like William Lambarde, William Hakewill (who probably knew John Hooker through Exeter connections) and Hooker himself, whose sense of past precedent was an active influence on their understanding of parliament. Whether an esprit de corps had developed among earlier generations of MPs is difficult to analyse with any precision given the nature of the surviving evidence, but it certainly existed by the second half of the 16th century. To quote from a collection of essays on Elizabethan parliaments: ‘Drawn from every county and enfranchised borough, parliament gave its members a sense of collective identity, a unity of purpose and a sense of shared experience, of nation’.[[79]](#endnote-79) Having a permanent home since 1548 can only have nurtured that sense of belonging, reinforced through parliamentary ritual and affirmed by an accumulating collective memory of rights and conventions.

Privy councillors and other servants of the crown carried additional heft in the Commons, but a kind of equality was also believed to operate within the confines of the chamber. In the words of one member, speaking in mitigation of William Parry’s bizarre outburst against the 1585 bill criminalising Jesuit priests, it was

not agreable to the liberties and ffreedome of the House that anie member therof for shewinge his opinion in a bill redd amonge them selves should be taken from his seate and sequestred from the socyetie… ffor that the onelie waye to have matters perfectlie understoode and rightlie digested was to suffer men freelie to utter their conseites of both sides. Besides he thought, it was iniustice that seeinge all men in that place had like authoritie one as muche as an other anie member there should be punished by his fellowe member.[[80]](#endnote-80)

This sense of being part of a ‘society’ or corporate body, equivalent to the university colleges or inns of court where many of them had spent time, was strong amongst Elizabethan MPs.[[81]](#endnote-81) Between the four walls of St Stephen’s, things could be said that would lead to claims of libel, disloyalty or worse if voiced outside. The aspiration to amity in the chamber is well described in Hooker’s journal covering the final days of the 1571 parliament, when Sir Walter Mildmay put it to the House ‘that as all they there mett together yn peax and love, so dyd wyshe they sholde so depart and that no advantage sholde be taken of any words there past, but all to be best’. The old soldier Edward Grimston concurred, suggesting that a collection should be made for the French Protestant church in London (raising £30), and – apparently no more contentious an issue – that the Queen should be encouraged towards ‘the recoverye of Ireland yn to good order’. Speaker Sir Christopher Wray summed up the mood of the House by craving the good will of every person there, ‘that if he hadd slypped yn any thinge they shold impute it to his ignoraunce and not to any wyllfullnes’.[[82]](#endnote-82)

MPs also remembered stories associated with the building. One parliamentary diary explained the holes in the walls above some of the seats in the chamber as dating from the early sessions of the Elizabethan parliament, when posts were installed to support a scaffold running around the house ‘for them to sitt on which used the wearing of great Breeches stuffed with haire like woolsacks… This all the old Parliament men affirmed talking one day together in the house before the Speaker came’.[[83]](#endnote-83)  Approving references to the ‘grave old Parlyment man’, as authority figure and upholder of the collective memory of the house, are scattered throughout the journals and diaries which help us to reconstruct the political culture of the Elizabethan Commons. The reassuring presence of old members was missed by William Fleetwood in November 1584, who pictured the new knights and burgesses assembling in the parliament house ‘owt of all order, in troops, standing upon the fflowre making strange noises, there being not past vij or viij of the old parliamentes’.[[84]](#endnote-84) On another occasion Fleetwood, characterised by Paul Seaward as a ‘prolific rememberer’, reminded the House of John Story’s challenging paraphrase of scripture in 1549, ‘Woe unto thee England when the king is a child’: words that had landed Story in the Tower, and one of the earliest recorded speeches in the new Commons chamber.[[85]](#endnote-85) Referring to a time even before the move into St Stephen’s, Peter Wentworth said he had ‘divers times heard of auntient Parlament men’ that Henry VIII ‘would never seeme to punish, nay, that which is much lesse, not once to shew him selfe agreived or offended with any Parlament man for any speeche used in that Parlament House’.[[86]](#endnote-86) The Commons chamber functioned as a site and a stimulus of political recollection, complementing the other repositories of memory – written records, ancient and recent history, members themselves – identified by Seaward as helping to make parliament ‘much more concrete’ in this period.[[87]](#endnote-87)

To whom did the Commons chamber belong? As late as 1674 Sir John Birkenhead asserted that ‘the House is the King’s chapel, and the Surveyor has orders from the King’s own mouth to repair, or make alterations’, although this was a technical intervention in a tussle over the door of the gallery into the Speaker’s chamber rather than a point of high constitutional theory.[[88]](#endnote-88) The material culture of the Elizabethan Commons chamber was threaded through with royal iconography, starting with the Speaker’s chair. Speaker Richard Onslow emphasised his election by the ‘plaine commons’ and Speaker Coke made a rhetorical play that ‘I am a servant to the House’, but as they both knew the reality was more complicated.[[89]](#endnote-89) Sir Thomas Smith tells us that the Speaker sat ‘somewhat higher’ in the Commons chamber, ‘that he may see and be seen of them all’.[[90]](#endnote-90) Above the Speaker’s head was a ‘table’ or representation of the royal arms.[[91]](#endnote-91) The Exchequer accounts for 1586-7 refer to ‘Makinge a chaier for Speaker of the Lower House’, evidently a more elaborate replacement of the seat ‘at the higher end in the midle of the lower rowe’ recorded by John Hooker. William Lambarde’s ‘Notes’ on the procedures of the Commons, datable to the early 1580s, explain that ‘The fittest seat for him is the lowest row and the middest thereof, for so he may be best heard when he shall speak’; the implication seems to be that the Speaker sat with his fellow MPs until provided with a chair reserved for his use.[[92]](#endnote-92) In 1584-5 serjeant painter George Gower was paid 40*s*. ‘for an Arms of England guilded w[i]th fine golde and wrought in oile collo[ur]s’. Subsequent accounts describe ‘a paire of Armes which hangeth over the Speaker’, with gilded supporters. The arms were renewed by Gower’s successor Leonard Fryer for the 1597 parliament, and again in 1601-2, when we have our fullest description of ‘the Quenes Armes moulded in a table and a frame with a p[er]tinent over it and guilded knobbs standing upon the topp of the Armes all fyne goulde and bice in oyle Collors’.[[93]](#endnote-93) Hooker describes MPs making ‘dutiful and humble obeysaunce’ on entering the chamber, before taking their seats.[[94]](#endnote-94) This is surely the explanation of MPs bowing when they come into the Commons: acknowledging the virtual presence of the monarch, in accordance with etiquette in other royal palaces or courts of law and consistent with the three ‘obeysaunces’ made by the Speaker himself before addressing the Queen at the opening of parliament.[[95]](#endnote-95)

Theoretically elected by members of the Commons, the occupant of the Speaker’s chair was in practice a royal nominee. One modern commentator goes further, arguing that the royal arms identified the Speaker as ‘the personification in the house of commons of the authority of the crown, without which the House lacked any *raison d’être*’.[[96]](#endnote-96) Certainly the Speaker had to remain in place for the Commons to be in session, hence the infamous incident when Speaker John Finch was held down in his chair in 1629. Whether this gave him complete control over debate was among Peter Wentworth’s questions ‘towching the libertie of the Parleament Howse’ in March 1587, when he asked ‘Whether the Speaker maye rise when he will, anie matter beinge propounded without consent of the House or nott’.[[97]](#endnote-97) The Speaker was paid a handsome official salary (in fact the second highest in crown service), wore black clothing marking him out from other members, and enjoyed privileged personal access to the monarch.[[98]](#endnote-98) At the same time, however, the Speaker was ‘officially the creation and mouthpiece of the Commons’, required to convey often unwelcome messages from the House.[[99]](#endnote-99) In Elizabeth’s reign this translated into petitions about marriage, religion, and freedom of speech which the Queen found unpalatable at best and not infrequently interpreted as an outrageous challenge to her prerogative. Through noise and through silence, Elizabethan MPs kept up a degree of commentary over the choice of Speaker. In 1584 the nomination of John Puckering was not well received, some members remaining stubbornly silent when invited to join in his acclamation.[[100]](#endnote-100) MPs were even more restive in 1597, when Hayward Townshend recorded that they ‘hawked and spat’ during the announcement of Christopher Yelverton.[[101]](#endnote-101) When a conventionally unwilling new Speaker had made his speech of acceptance to the Queen, he was escorted to the Commons and ‘set in his place by them’: a reminder that he was their man as well as the crown’s.[[102]](#endnote-102)

One of the most potent appeals to history in the modern Westminster parliament is the Speaker’s procession, led by the serjeant at arms. As Paul Seaward has pointed out, we actually know very little about the origins of some of the customs and ceremonies cited to justify the long continuity in the British way of doing politics.[[103]](#endnote-103) In a ‘thick description’ of the opening and closing days of parliament in the Tudor period, David Dean has highlighted the exclusion of the Commons from the royal procession through the streets and the sacred rituals in the Abbey, in contrast to the more inclusive ‘riding’ to parliament in Scotland. The English nobility and senior clergy, privy councillors and members of the royal household took part in this public exercise of royal magnificence, but not the main body of MPs.[[104]](#endnote-104) It needs to be recognised, however, that the 16th-century Commons had a ritual life of its own: less visible than that of the Lords, located more in the daily rhythms of government than the formalised splendour of state occasions, but nonetheless crucial in maintaining the political identity and institutional memory of the lower house.

Other than the Speaker himself, the key figure in the ceremonial life of the Commons was the serjeant at arms. Describing the office of ‘the Sergeant or porter of the lower house’, Hooker explained that ‘He must alwaies attend the Speaker, and go before him, carying his mace upon his shoulder’.[[105]](#endnote-105) The serjeant was a royal appointee, the mace at this time not a unique object but one of several ceremonial maces kept in the jewel house. His salary derived both from the crown (12*s*. per day) and from members (4*s*. per session from knights of the shire, 2*s*.6*d*. from citizens like Hooker and 2*s*. from the burgesses), making the serjeant at once a liveried royal retainer and a paid officer of the Commons.[[106]](#endnote-106) As the senior doorkeeper of the House, he wielded the keys to the chamber and the authority to exclude unruly members as well as undesirable petitioners. The mace symbolising his authority was a weighty ceremonial staff topped with an imperial crown, hence the need to carry it on his shoulder.[[107]](#endnote-107) As an illustration of its symbolic value, in 1543 the mace was damaged in a fracas with city of London officials when the serjeant attempted to use it as a warrant to secure the release of an MP imprisoned for debt.[[108]](#endnote-108)

The royal imagery surrounding both the Speaker and the serjeant needs to be understood within a symbolic register of overlapping meanings. Recent work on portraits and other Tudor royal iconography has steered us away from making straightforward assumptions about fixed interpretations of visual culture. Images of Queen Elizabeth could be perceived in diverse ways by different audiences, an insight into contemporary readings of material culture which can also be extended to the Commons chamber. As a visual language of power, the royal arms and the mace could be read as encompassing crown and nation as well as monarch: the realm of England that Peter Wentworth invoked in his appeal to the Commons ‘not to be timeservers and humour feeders’.[[109]](#endnote-109) This interpretation of the royal iconography of the Commons would help to explain the refurbishment of the Speaker’s chair with a new set of royal arms in 1645, when parliament and Charles I were actually at war.

The prominence of royal symbolism within the Elizabethan Commons, far from cowing members with a sense of monarchical authority, instead functioned to legitimate counsel and even loyal criticism of the sovereign. Without this protecting veil, it is difficult to see how the Commons could openly have debated William Strickland’s assertion in 1571 that parliament possessed ‘such fullnes of power as even the right of the crowne was to bee determined… it was fitt princes to have their prerogative but yet the same to bee straytned within reasonable limittes’.[[110]](#endnote-110) That a symbol of royal authority could be read in different ways is affirmed by modern discussion of the current Commons mace dating from 1660, explained variously as ‘the emblem of the King’s authority’ (according to one twentieth-century clerk of works) and ‘a symbol of the authority of the House’ (quoting a deputy serjeant at arms).[[111]](#endnote-111) A similar point could be made about House of Commons green: the dominant colour for the upholstery and fabrics of the lower house by the 17th century and a defining feature of Pugin’s decorative scheme for the post-1834 House of Commons, but in Elizabeth’s reign carrying associations of the green adopted by Henry VII for his family heraldry. In 1584-5 six ‘longe grene quishinges [cushions]’ were purchased for the chamber at 3*s*. 4*d*. the piece, presumably for the benefit of the privy councillors and prominent citizens sitting on the ‘lower rowe’.[[112]](#endnote-112)

Other customs and rituals regulated the working life of the Elizabethan Commons. Admission of members to the chamber following their election required the swearing of an oath, a long-standing practice given additional meaning by the context of the Reformation (in which oaths of loyalty had featured since the 1530s), and in Elizabeth’s reign by concerns for the Queen’s safety from conspiracy and assassination. Hooker’s account of the opening of the 1571 parliament describes how every MP ‘was sworne to the Quene’ whilst Elizabeth and the Lords attended the sermon in Westminster Abbey, ‘as also order taken that [n]one shoulde enter yn to that Howse being of that companye oneles he were sworne upon payne’. An anonymous journal for the same session specifies that members of the lower house were ‘sworne to the supremacie’ before a panel of privy councillors sitting in the Commons chamber, thus demanding their subscription to one of the central tenets of the Elizabethan religious settlement.[[113]](#endnote-113)

If they missed out on the dean of Westminster’s preaching at the opening of parliament, then members of the Commons were drawn together by the orations of the Speaker and the highly-charged speeches justifying supply in which Sir Walter Mildmay specialised. In 1571 Speaker Wray elaborated on the maxim that ‘Of religion the prynce was the cheffe protector and governore yn his owne realme and no foreyn potentate’, echoing the Act in Restraint of Appeals which had launched Henry VIII’s break from Rome.[[114]](#endnote-114) In 1581 and again six years later, Mildmay whipped up the House with his vision of ‘England our native countrey one of the most renowned monarchies in the world’, protected by the sea and the love of her majesty’s subjects but in deadly peril from the Holy League: ‘a plott longe agoe prepared by the Pope and his confederates to overthrowe the gospell in all places where the same is professed’. The equivalent speech in 1589 exulted in the recent defeat of the Spanish enterprise against England, but warned that a wise mariner knew that a second and yet more dangerous storm commonly followed the first: ‘our enemyes so greate, so malitious, so covetous, so cruel, so prowde as they will seeke to repaire the credyt they have lost’.[[115]](#endnote-115) Secular sermons such as these complemented the patriotically Protestant preaching which had galvanised the nation to resist the Armada and continued to keep England on a war footing throughout the 1590s.

David Dean describes Tudor parliaments as ‘surrounded in liturgical ceremony’.[[116]](#endnote-116) His subject is the sovereign and the Lords, but the point can be extended to encompass the third estate of knights, citizens and burgesses. Prayer was essential to the common life of Elizabethan MPs, preceding every day’s business in the chamber and cited as a rhetorical point in debate. When the House was considering the election of a new Speaker in 1581, Edward Lewknor moved ‘that we might all ioyne in prayer to God to directe us in our doyngs’ and offered a prayer suitable for the occasion which he conveniently had with him. This was duly read out by the clerk, the whole House then reciting the Lord’s Prayer.[[117]](#endnote-117) According to William Lambarde, one of his first tasks of a new Speaker was to exhort members ‘that for the better order of the House they will frequent the common prayer’. He should also ask their opinion ‘concerning prayers that shall be usually said every morning’, implying that the format of morning prayer in the Commons was chosen by common consent of the House rather than necessarily following the same rubric in every session.[[118]](#endnote-118) There is ample evidence in parliamentary diaries and the Commons Journal that prayers were indeed read out before the start of each morning’s business, as they were in the chapels of the two universities and the inns of court.[[119]](#endnote-119) Since there was no Speaker’s chaplain in this period, and no Church of England ministers sat in the Commons, prayers were led by the clerk or the Speaker himself. The replacement of Catholic modes of worship in a royal chapel with godly prayer in a secularised debating chamber cannot have escaped the notice of members of the Commons; indeed it was emblematic of the English Reformation. On occasion the juxtaposition of common prayer and parliamentary business must have been particularly significant, as on the morning of 28 February 1593 when ‘imediatlie after praiers the bill against [Catholic] recusantes was redd’.[[120]](#endnote-120) For some members, an act of spoken morning prayer was insufficient: in 1571 ‘order was taken that too of the Howse shold[e] be there apoynted to go to the byshop of London for a precher, who on everie mornynge at vii of the clocke sholde rede a lecture of iii quarters of an howre yn the parlament howse’.[[121]](#endnote-121)

The experience of praying together bound Elizabethan MPs to each other and to the act of governance. Within a political context moulded by the rule of a woman, internal and external threats to stability and the ever-present pressure for further religious reform, the texts of those prayers assume particular significance. John Hooker describes his working day beginning early with ‘the Common prayer, and Letanye which are openly red in the house’. The reading of the litany was also ‘the first thinge done when the Speaker is sett’.[[122]](#endnote-122) In the prayerbook as revised in 1559, the litany consisted of a series of responsory intercessions for divine protection from perils including the wrath of God, lightning and tempest, hypocrisy and vainglory, and ‘the craftes and assaultes of the Devil’. The language had a strongly penitential tone, offering petition for the forgiveness of the sins of the people and the avoiding of God’s judgement. The service was participatory rather than passive, requiring members to respond to the clerk after every verse, ‘Good Lorde delyver us’ and ‘We beseche thee to heare us good Lorde’.[[123]](#endnote-123) The Commons Journal describes the clerk kneeling to recite the litany, ‘answered by the whole House, of [sic] their Knees, with divers Prayers’.[[124]](#endnote-124) The psychological impact in the intimate surroundings of the former St Stephen’s chapel, in the half-light of an early morning in winter or spring, can be imagined. At the very least, its collective stillness must have contrasted with the noise and movement of the day’s business to come.

In common with other parts of the English liturgy as revised for the Book of Common Prayer, the 1559 litany put prayer for the monarchy centre-stage.[[125]](#endnote-125) Three successive petitions focused on the person of the Queen, for her preservation, her faith in God and true religion, and her triumph over her enemies:

That it may please thee, to kepe and strengthen in the true worshipping of thee in righteousness and holynes of lyfe, thy servaunt Elizabeth our most gracious Quene and governour... to rule her harte in thy faith, feare, and love, that she may evermore have affiaunce in thee, and ever seke thy honoure and glory… to be her defender and keper, geving her the victory over al her enemyes.[[126]](#endnote-126)

Members offered an affirmation of their own after each verse. The litany also included a separate ‘prayer of the Quenes majesty’, different in details but similar in tone to the collect for the Queen in the prayerbook communion service, beseeching God to bless and strengthen Elizabeth ‘that she may alway incline to thy wil, and walcke in thy waye’.[[127]](#endnote-127) Given the emphasis placed by godly MPs on ensuring that Elizabeth did indeed incline to the will of God (by allowing further reform in the church) and wake up to the threat posed by her Catholic enemies, it is tempting to speculate that they would have taken additional inspiration from such prayers. In 1563 prayers for the monarchy themselves became a reference-point in a speech on the succession, when members were rhetorically invited to ‘pray for the Queene’s Majestie and her magistrates that they may governe in such sort / that the people committed to their charge may leade a quiet, not a quarrelous, and peaceable, not a bloudy, life’ – blessings that only a settled succession could bring.[[128]](#endnote-128)

The petition specifically ‘for the high court of parliament’ in modern versions of the prayerbook litany did not appear in either the 1559 or 1662 texts, which limited itself to praying for the ‘Lordes of the Counsayle’, nobility and magistrates.[[129]](#endnote-129) Thanks to the careful transcriptions of Hayward Townshend, however, we know that a prayer for parliament was in use in the Elizabethan House of Commons, and it is worth quoting here at length. On the morning of 5 November 1597, ‘according to the usuall course the Speaker brought in a prayer, which I w[r]ott word for word out of the Clerke of the Parliamentes’ booke’. Referring to the Commons as ‘this honarable senate’ in the mode of classical Rome, the Speaker’s prayer moved from a confession of sins and appeal for wisdom to an act of collective dedication to the good governance of the nation:

most mercifull Father since by thy providence wee are called from all partes of the land to this famous councell of Parliament to advise of those thinges that concerne thy / glorie, the good of thy Church, the prosperitie of our prince and the weale of all her people, wee most intirelie beseech thee… expell darknesse and vanitie from our myndes and partiallitie from our speeches and graunt unto us such wisdome and integritie of heart as become the servantes of Jesus Christ, the subjectes of a gratious prince, and members of his honorable Howse. Lett us not, O Lord, whoe are mett togather for the publique good of the whole land be more carelesse and remisse then wee use to bee in our owne private causes. Give grace wee beseech thee that everie one of us may laboure to shewe a good conscience to thy majestie, a good zeale to thy word, a loyall hart to our prince and a Christian love to our countrie and common wealth.[[130]](#endnote-130)

Our principal sources for the political culture of the Elizabethan Commons, treatises by Hooker and Lambarde and the various journals and diaries kept by MPs, of their nature focus more on matters of legislation and debate and parliamentary procedure than on the self-perception of being a member of the lower house. In the Speaker’s prayer for parliament, however, we are offered a window in the soul of the House of Commons gathered together in the ancient chapel of St Stephen. Members were reminded that they were servants of Christ as well as subjects of a gracious Queen, drawn from across the kingdom to counsel the monarch for the good of the church and the commonwealth. The prayer concluded with an image of parliament as a ‘threefold cord not easilie broken’, ensuring that existing godly laws were properly executed and new ones enacted ‘for the bridling of the wicked and the encouragement of the godlie and well-affected subiectes’.[[131]](#endnote-131) Queen Elizabeth might sometimes resent its implications, but the members of her lower house were in no doubt about their God-given authority within the government of England.

*Conclusion*

So far as we know, Elizabeth I never stepped inside the royal chapel refurbished by her brother as the first dedicated House of Commons. This was her own decision: Henry VIII had personally brought the bill suppressing the lesser monasteries into the Commons chamber in March 1536, and John Hooker was clear that the sovereign ‘is at his choice and libertie to come, or not to come to the Parlament’ (though he was probably thinking about its formal opening and closing rather than the daily deliberations of the two houses).[[132]](#endnote-132) The image of the Queen in parliament popularised by the 1682 edition of Simonds D’Ewes’ *Journals* depicts Elizabeth as she appeared in person in the palace of Westminster, presiding from her chair of estate in the House of Lords. In the lower house her presence was represented by the royal arms above the Speaker’s chair, the mace borne by the serjeant, and the prayers for her welfare which preceded every morning’s business in the chamber. Sworn to uphold the supremacy of the Queen and surrounded by visual reminders of her authority, members of the Commons transacted their business within the broader culture of professed devotion which defined the rule of Elizabeth. The symbolism through which that loyalty was expressed, however, could have more than one layer of meaning. If portraits of the Queen commissioned by her courtiers aimed at counselling Elizabeth through praising her, so the iconography and ritual of the Commons chamber served to sanction a dialogue about the proper exercise of royal power. The Speaker and the serjeant served two masters, the Commons as well as the crown. The acquisition of a settled meeting-place added a sense of location to the political memory of the Commons, even as it provided new space for the storage of its physical records.

The culture of debate in the early modern House of Commons derived from many sources. Networks of patronage and clientage, religious faith, codes of social deference, and understandings of history and the law all played their part besides the impulse to serve monarchy and state. But the architecture of the former St Stephen’s Chapel was also crucial in framing how the Commons functioned as a place of meeting and debate. The layout of that chamber, its size and furniture and acoustics, could have different consequences in different political contexts. Chris Kyle has commented on the ‘tonal, even auditory, difference in speech between Elizabethan and Jacobean Parliaments’, as the leisured rhetoric characteristic of the later 16th century gave way to a sharper and adversarial debating style reflective of a more challenging relationship between crown and commons.[[133]](#endnote-133) The search for the first shoots of the modern British parliament in the Elizabethan period, the origins of oppositional debate or a government front bench, is based on a false assumption as well as a selective reading of the evidence. That said, the relationship between space, sound and politics in the parliaments of Elizabeth I remains worthy of the closest attention. Procedure in the Commons, contemporary understanding of the institution, and the self-perception of MPs were all moulded by the move into St Stephen’s. Elizabethan members of parliament did not openly conceptualise the links between architecture and politics, as modern politicians at Westminster and Holyrood and the Welsh Assembly are wont to do. But the sources they have left us enable those connections to be explored, revealing the converted St Stephen’s chapel as a site of ceremony, of memory, and of prayer as well as a place of debate.

In the preface to what would be his final monograph, Sir Geoffrey Elton was in reflective, maybe even mischievous mood. ‘The completion of a book is always a relief, but I am perhaps exceptionally relieved to be done with the Parliaments of Elizabeth’, he wrote. The Victorians – and their ‘obedient successors’ – have misled us by reading the modern Parliament back into history. Elton even wondered aloud whether Parliament ‘ever really mattered all that much in the politics of the nation, except perhaps as a stage sometimes used by the real contenders over government and policy.’[[134]](#endnote-134) While applauding some of what Elton says, we may turn it around by turning back to Hooker’s 1572 reference to parliament as a kind of theatre. The Elizabethan Commons did indeed constitute a theatre: for affairs of state and individual political careers, but also for representations of power, for negotiating the boundaries between crown and commonwealth, and for the assertion of the equality of MPs with their social betters in the Lords. We might fairly conclude that by moving into St Stephen’s chapel, ‘the common house’ became in a new sense the House of Commons.

1. *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I*, ed. T.E. Hartley (3 vols, 1981-5), ii, 118; David Dean, ‘Public Space, Private Affairs: Committees, Petitions and Lobbies in the Early Modern English Parliament’, in *Parliament at Work: Parliamentary Committees, Political Power and Public Access in Early Modern England*, ed. Chris R. Kyle and Jason Peacey (Woodbridge, 2002), 174; Norman L. Jones, ‘Parliament and the Political Society of Elizabethan England’, in *Tudor Political Culture*, ed. Dale Hoak (Cambridge, 1995), 236. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I*, ed. Hartley, i, 505; iii, 375. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I*, ed. Hartley, i, 146. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. G.R. Elton, ‘Tudor Government: The Points of Contact’, in *Studies in Tudor and Stuart Politics and Government* (Cambridge, 1982), iii, 21. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. David Dean, ‘Image and Ritual in the Tudor Parliaments’, in Hoak, *Tudor Political Culture*, 246. Dean dates the move to 1549. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Chris Bryant, *Parliament the Biography*: *Ancestral Voices* (2014), 157. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. On the Painted Chamber see Jennifer Caddick, ‘The Painted Chamber at Westminster and the Openings of Parliament, 1399-1484’ in this volume. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. David Harrison, ‘Parliaments, MPs and the Buildings of Westminster in the Middle Ages’, in *Westminster: II. The Art, Architecture and Archaeology of the Royal Palace*, ed. Warwick Rodwell and Tim Tatton-Browne (Leeds, 2015), 134-6, 142-6; S. Mendyk, ‘Hooker, John (c.1527–1601)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, May 2005. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Alasdair Hawkyard, *The House of Commons 1509-1558: Personnel, Procedure, Precedent and Change* (Chichester, 2016), 5-6, 332-3. I am grateful for Paul Seaward’s advice on this point. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. ‘St Stephen’s Chapel Westminster: Visual and Political Culture 1292-1941’, AH/K006991/1 (2013-17), funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the University of York in partnership with the UK Parliament, Principal Investigator Dr John Cooper. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Visualizations of St Stephen’s chapel, the Commons chamber and the palace environment can be accessed at https://www.virtualststephens.org.uk/explore. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. The following two paragraphs draw freely on research conducted by the medieval section of the St Stephen’s project and the digital modelling team at the Centre for the Study of Christianity and Culture at York, notably the work of Tim Ayers, Elizabeth Biggs, Anthony Masinton, and Maureen Jurkowski. I have benefited greatly from their guidance on the pre-1548 chapel and college of St Stephen. This article also utilises transcriptions of manuscript records made by project research assistant Simon Neal. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. John Goodall, ‘St Stephen’s Chapel, Westminster’, in *Westminster: Art, Architecture and Archaeology*, ed. Rodwell and Tatton-Browne, 112-13. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. On St Stephen’s and the chapel royal see Elizabeth Biggs, ‘The College and Canons of St Stephen’s, Westminster, 1358-1548’, University of York PhD, 2017, ch. 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. On the acoustics of St Stephen’s as the Commons chamber see Catriona Cooper, ‘The Sound of Debate in Georgian England: Auralizing the House of Commons’ in this volume. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Wyngaerde’s drawing of Westminster is in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, WA.1950.206.1; see *The Panorama of London circa 1544*, ed. H.M. Colvin and Susan Foister (1996), 17, and *The History of the King’s Works*, ed. H.M. Colvin (6 vols, 1963-82), iv, 9. The two sections of the drawing perhaps by Lucas Cornelis de Kock are in the Victoria & Albert Museum (acc. no. E 128-1924) and the Musée du Louvre, Paris (INV 18702, verso); see Mark Collins, ‘The Topography of the Old Palace of Westminster, 1510-1834’, in *Westminster: Art, Architecture and Archaeology*, ed. Rodwell and Tatton-Browne, 207, and Ann Saunders, ‘Westminster Hall: A Sixteenth Century Drawing?’, *The London Journal*, xii (1986), 29-35. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Estimated dimensions from Anthony Masinton, based on surveys by John Carter and Frederick Mackenzie and the 16th-century drawing of St Stephen’s in the Victoria & Albert Museum, see n. 16 above. The height of Westminster Hall is 90’6” (27.58m) to the ridge of the roof. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. *The Autobiography and Correspondence of Sir Simonds D'Ewes*, ed. J.O. Halliwell (2 vols, 1845), i, 414; J.M. Blatchly, ‘D'Ewes, Sir Simonds, first baronet (1602–1650)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. J.E. Neale, *The Elizabethan House of Commons* (1949), 364-5. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. *Parliament in Elizabethan England: John Hooker’s Order and Usage*, ed. V. F. Snow (New Haven and London, 1977), 164. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Patrick Collinson, ‘Neale, Sir John Ernest (1890–1975)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. G.R. Elton, *The Parliament of England 1559-1581* (Cambridge, 1986), [viii], 351. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Jennifer Loach, *Parliament under the Tudors* (Oxford, 1991), 43, 49. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Alasdair Hawkyard, ‘From Painted Chamber to St Stephen’s Chapel: The Meeting Places of the House of Commons at Westminster until 1603’, *Parliamentary History*,xxi (2002), 64-6, 68, 74. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. The recorder of London William Fleetwood, for instance, was lobbied by a draper and a London alderman ‘at the parliament door’ in favour of reducing the statutory breadth of woollen cloth: David Dean, *Law-Making and Society in Late Elizabethan England: The Parliament of England, 1584-1601* (Cambridge, 1996), 135. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. D.M. Dean and Norman L. Jones, ‘Representation, Ideology and Action in the Elizabethan Parliaments’, in D.M. Dean and Norman L. Jones, *The Parliaments of Elizabethan England* (Oxford, 1990), 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. *Hooker’s Order and Usage*, ed. Snow, 163; Elton, *Parliament of England*, 25. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Chris R. Kyle, *Theater of State: Parliament and Political Culture in Early Modern England* (Stanford, 2012), 1-2. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Chris R. Kyle and Jason Peacey, ‘“Under Cover of So Much Coming and Going”: Public Access to Parliament and the Political Process in Early Modern England’, in *Parliament at Work*, ed. Kyle and Peacey, 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Biggs, ‘College and Canons of St Stephen’s’, 117. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. TNA, E 351/3326; Hawkyard, *House of Commons 1509-1558*, 195; *History of the King’s Works*, ed. Colvin, iv, 291-2. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. *CJ*, i, 27. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Hawkyard, *House of Commons 1509-1558*, 199. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I*, ed. Hartley, ii, 66. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. For instance the fee of 40*s.* claimed by Serjeant Cowyer at the end of the 1589 parliament: TNA, E 351/3223. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. *Hooker’s Order and Usage*, ed. Snow, 186. By ‘Parlement house’ Hooker means both the Commons and the Lords (‘parliament chamber’ referred exclusively to the Lords in this period). Thomas Cromwell’s journal distinguishes between ‘the Howse’ and ‘owr Howse’: *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I*, ed. Hartley, ii, 102. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Paul Hentzner, *Itinerarium Germaniae, Galliae, Angliae, Italiae* (Nuremberg, 1612), 126, ‘In Camera, ubi Parlamentum congregari & haberi solet, *sellae & parietes* [seats and walls] *ex ligno Hybernico* fabricate sunt’. The former St Stephen’s chapel would have been easier for a visitor to access than the House of Lords in the privy palace, where the benches were presumably cleared away when not in use and the walls were hung with tapestries: *CSP Ven*. 1558-80, p. 23. I am grateful to Paul Hunneyball and Robin Eagles for their advice on these points. See also L. L. Ford, ‘Hentzner, Paul (1558–1623)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, May 2006. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Maurice Howard, ‘Recycling the Monastic Fabric: Beyond the Act of Dissolution’, in *The Archaeology of the Reformation 1480-1580*, ed. David Gaimster and Roberta Gilchrist (Leeds, 2003), 221. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. The 1548 inventory of St Stephen’s chapel and the ‘nether’ or lower chapel (the modern St Mary Undercroft) is TNA, E 117/11/49. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Collins, ‘Topography of the Old Palace of Westminster’, 215; Living Heritage pages, http://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/building/palace/estatehistory/reformation-1834/shaping-the-commons-/ [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. In 1548 the college of St Stephen was one canon short (owing to the recent death of John Crayford) but otherwise had its full stipulated staff of clerks, choristers and chantry priests: Biggs, ‘College and Canons of St Stephen’s’, 163. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. TNA, E 351/3326. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. *Hooker’s Order and Usage*, ed. Snow, 163; *CSP Ven*. 1558-80, p. 23. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Anthony Geraghty, *The Sheldonian Theatre: Architecture and Learning in Seventeenth-Century Oxford* (New Haven and London, 2013), 15-18. With its tiered seating, vice-chancellor’s throne and doorkeepers to raise and lower the bar, St Mary’s as configured for the Act disputations shared several key features with the House of Commons meeting in St Stephen’s Chapel. I am grateful to James Jago for discussion of this point. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. The Virtual St Stephen’s reconstructions estimate the seating capacity of the Commons chamber at 334, based on 50cm per MP; information courtesy of Anthony Masinton. In 1604 a gallery was constructed at the western end of the chamber, to ease overcrowding: Alasdair Hawkyard, ‘Inigo Jones, the Surveyors of the Works and the “Parliament House”’, *Parliamentary History*, xxxii (2013), 17-18. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Hawkyard, ‘From Painted Chamber to St Stephen’s Chapel’, 80-1. The mural of Edward III and St George was on the north side of the chapel, which could be interpreted as an argument for the location of the royal pew. Other authorities place the pew on the south side. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Calculations made for the Virtual St Stephen’s visualizations. These dimensions differ slightly from two different sets given by Hawkyard: see *House of Commons 1509-1558*, 198, and ‘From Painted Chamber to St Stephen’s Chapel’, 79. Whether the refectory had itself been able to seat everyone is unclear; Jennifer Loach thought it likely that ‘most members had to stand’, see *Parliament under the Tudors*, 44. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. TNA, E 351/3326, E 351/3233 (‘raising the batlements where the recordes of the Parliament Howse lyeth’). For the Commons Journal see Alasdair Hawkyard, ‘The Journals, the Clerks of the Parliaments and the Under-Clerks 1485-1601’, *Parliamentary History*,xxxiii (2014), 413. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. TNA, E 351/3219. The ‘p[ar]ticion… in the lower Howse’ mended at the same time as the ceiling may refer to the re-worked pulpitum. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I*, ed. Hartley, iii, 100, 106. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Kyle, *Theater of State*, 60-1. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I*, ed. Hartley, iii, 453. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I*, ed. Hartley, iii, 97. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I*, ed. Hartley, i, 452. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I*, ed. Hartley, iii, 78. The anonymous journal describes the speaker as ‘*ignotus et obscurus*’. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I*, ed. Hartley, iii, 46-7; J.E. Neale, *Elizabeth I and her Parliaments 1584-1601* (1957), ch. 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I*, ed. Hartley, i, 357. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. On note-taking and table desks see Kyle, *Theater of State*, 67-8. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I*, ed. Hartley, iii, 95-6. For absenteeism see M.A.R. Graves, ‘Managing Elizabethan Parliaments’, in D.M. Dean and Norman L. Jones, *The Parliaments of Elizabethan England* (Oxford, 1990), 52. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I*, ed. Hartley, iii, 117. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I*, ed. Hartley, ii, 125. When his anecdote about poison and the Bishop of Winchester’s cook prompted unwelcome laughter in the House, Fleetwood silenced it with a memory of watching a convicted poisoner boiled to death: ‘I was a litle boye sitting behind m[y] grandfather apon a horse and was taken away when I cryde for feare, for I tell yow it was a terrible matter to behold’ – *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I*, ed. Hartley, ii, 109. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I*, ed. Hartley, i, 376. Chris Kyle has explained how silence operated as a ‘deliberate signifier of shock and protest’ in the Commons: *Theater of State*, 47. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I*, ed. Hartley, iii, 62. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. *Hooker’s Order and Usage*, ed. Snow, 164. [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. The committee room is mentioned in two sources dating from March 1576: *CJ*,i, 111, and *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I*, ed. Hartley, i, 458. Hooker’s journal for 1571 records two men, Thomas Clerk and his companion from the Inner Temple, ‘founde to be yn Howse, being none of that company’, committed to the serjeant’s ward for two days: *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I*, ed. Hartley, i, 245. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. *Hooker’s Order and Usage*, ed. Snow, 169; *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I*, ed. Hartley, i, 434. [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. The Living Heritage pages of the UK Parliament website incorrectly state there were two doors in the pulpitum: http://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/building/palace/estatehistory/reformation-1834/shaping-the-commons-/ [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I*, ed. Hartley, ii, 113. [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
69. Dean, *Law-Making and Society in Late Elizabethan England*, 22. [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
70. *Hooker’s Order and Usage*, ed. Snow, 164; *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I*, ed. Hartley, i, 434. [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
71. George Gilbert Scott, *Personal and Professional Recollections* (1879), 76. [↑](#endnote-ref-71)
72. *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I*, ed. Hartley, iii, 470. By his own account, Townshend’s intervention did the trick: the bill passed. [↑](#endnote-ref-72)
73. TNA, E 351/3203. [↑](#endnote-ref-73)
74. M.A.R. Graves, *The Tudor Parliaments: Crown, Lords and Commons, 1485-1603* (1985), 21. [↑](#endnote-ref-74)
75. Ventriloquizing for the Queen at the closing session of the 1584-5 parliament session, lord chancellor Sir Thomas Bromley rebuked that element of the Commons which had ‘contemteously and disdaynfullye reiectid such matters as cam from their betters, the lordes of the Higher House’: *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I*, ed. Hartley, ii, 192. [↑](#endnote-ref-75)
76. *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I*, ed. Hartley, i, 459-60. [↑](#endnote-ref-76)
77. For example ‘this Court of the Nether House’, *CJ*, i, 59. [↑](#endnote-ref-77)
78. *Hooker’s Order and Usage*, ed. Snow, 183. [↑](#endnote-ref-78)
79. D.M. Dean and Norman L. Jones, ‘Representation, Ideology and Action in the Elizabethan Parliaments’, in Dean and Jones, *Parliaments of Elizabethan England*, 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-79)
80. *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I*, ed. Hartley, ii, 159. [↑](#endnote-ref-80)
81. In 1576 Peter Wentworth reminded the Commons ‘wee are incorporated into this place to serve God and all England’: *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I*, ed. Hartley, i, 432-3. [↑](#endnote-ref-81)
82. *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I*, ed. Hartley, i, 256. [↑](#endnote-ref-82)
83. Huntington Library, EL MS 2578, f. 49r. I am grateful to Elizabeth Biggs for this reference. See also *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I*, ed. Hartley, iii, 493. [↑](#endnote-ref-83)
84. *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I*, ed. Hartley, ii, 65. [↑](#endnote-ref-84)
85. *CJ* i, 9; *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I*, ed. Hartley, i, 327, 360; *HPC* 1509-58, ‘Story, John (c. 1504-71)’; Paul Seaward, ‘Institutional Memory and Contemporary History in the House of Commons, 1547-1640’, in *Writing the History of Parliament*, ed. Paul Cavill and Alexandra Gajda,forthcoming. [↑](#endnote-ref-85)
86. *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I*, ed. Hartley, ii, 328. [↑](#endnote-ref-86)
87. Seaward, ‘Institutional Memory and Contemporary History’. [↑](#endnote-ref-87)
88. *Grey’s Debates of the House of Commons* (13 vols, 1769), ii, 363. I owe this reference to James Jago. [↑](#endnote-ref-88)
89. *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I*, ed. Hartley, i, 168; iii, 89. [↑](#endnote-ref-89)
90. *De Republica Anglorum, by Sir Thomas Smith*, ed. Mary Dewar (Cambridge, 1982), 82. [↑](#endnote-ref-90)
91. A payment of 40*s*. to ‘Paynters for paynting the Kinges [sic] Armes embossed w[i]t[h] the garter w[i]th fyne oyle colours’ was noted in 1565-7, although it is not clear where in the palace these were located: TNA, E 351/3203. The equivalent account for 1576 specifies 20*s*. for ‘armes to hang in the lower p[ar]liamente Howse’: TNA, E 351/3211. [↑](#endnote-ref-91)
92. TNA E 351/3221; *William Lambarde’s Notes on the Procedures and Privileges of the House of Commons (1584)*, ed. Paul L. Ward (House of Commons Library Document no 10, 1977), 56. The cost of the new Speaker’s chair was included among stools, forms and other joinery work coming to £3 11*s*. 8*d*. [↑](#endnote-ref-92)
93. TNA, E 351/3219, E 351/3223, E 351/3233, E 351/3237; *Hooker’s Order and Usage*, ed. Snow, 164. Bice was a deep blue pigment obtained from smalt, finely pulverized glass coloured by cobalt oxide. [↑](#endnote-ref-93)
94. *Hooker’s Order and Usage*, ed. Snow, 188. [↑](#endnote-ref-94)
95. For instance in 1563, when Speaker Thomas Williams was brought to the bar of the Lords by comptroller of the household Sir Edward Rogers and principal secretary Sir William Cecil: *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I*, ed. Hartley, i, 73. See also *William Lambarde’s Notes*,ed. Ward, 57. [↑](#endnote-ref-95)
96. Alasdair Hawkyard, ‘The Tudor Speakers 1485-1601: Choosing, Status, Work’, in *Speakers and the Speakership*, ed. Paul Seaward (Chichester, 2010), 48. [↑](#endnote-ref-96)
97. *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I*, ed. Hartley, ii, 321. [↑](#endnote-ref-97)
98. *William Lambarde’s Notes*,ed. Ward, 70; Hawkyard, *House of Commons 1509-1558*, 210-11. [↑](#endnote-ref-98)
99. *Speakers and the Speakership*, ed. Seaward, 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-99)
100. *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I*, ed. Hartley, i, 524. [↑](#endnote-ref-100)
101. *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I*, ed. Hartley, iii, 227. [↑](#endnote-ref-101)
102. *William Lambarde’s Notes*, ed. Ward, 58. [↑](#endnote-ref-102)
103. Seaward, ‘Institutional Memory and Contemporary History’, [6] [↑](#endnote-ref-103)
104. Dean, ‘Image and Ritual’, 246, 262-3. [↑](#endnote-ref-104)
105. *Hooker’s Order and Usage*, ed. Snow, 173. Snow draws a distinction between the serjeant in the Lords, ‘who served the lord keeper rather than the House’, and the serjeant in the Commons, ‘who served the House not the Speaker’, although it’s not clear on what evidence this is based: n. 71. [↑](#endnote-ref-105)
106. Fees from *Hooker’s Order and Usage*, ed. Snow, 173, and *William Lambarde’s Notes*, ed. Ward, 70. The serjeant theoretically received his livery from the great wardrobe, although the payments have not yet been traced: Hawkyard, *House of Commons 1509-1558*, 216. [↑](#endnote-ref-106)
107. Peter Thorne, *The Mace in the House of Commons* (House of Commons Library Document no 3, 1957); T. Wilson, *Historical Note on Maces, with Special Reference to the Mace in the House of Commons, Westminster* (1922). [↑](#endnote-ref-107)
108. Peter Thorne, *The Royal Mace in the House of Commons* (House of Commons Library Document no 18, 1990), 36-7. [↑](#endnote-ref-108)
109. *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I*, ed. Hartley, i, 432-3. [↑](#endnote-ref-109)
110. Strickland’s words as explained and justified by Christopher Yelverton: *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I*, ed. Hartley, i, 238-9. Strickland had been sequestered from the House and questioned by the council, but not arrested; he returned the day after Yelverton’s speech. See *HPC* 1558-1603, ‘Strickland, William (d. 1598)’. [↑](#endnote-ref-110)
111. Wilson, *Historical Note on Maces*, 6; Thorne, *Mace in the House of Commons*, 6-7. [↑](#endnote-ref-111)
112. TNA, E 351/3219. One of the battle standards presented by the victorious Henry VII to St Paul’s in 1485 depicted a red dragon painted on green and white sarsenet: Sydney Anglo, *Spectacle, Pageantry and Early Tudor Policy* (Oxford, 1969), 10. The image of Henry VIII in parliament in the 1523 Wriothesley Garter Book imagines a green and white chequerboard floor, in homage to the Tudor royal colours: reproduced in Christopher Lloyd and Simon Thurley, *Henry VIII: Images of a Tudor King* (Oxford, 1990), 42. When the Elizabethan privy council sat as the court of star chamber, a green cloth replaced the usual red on the council table; the choice of green for the councillors’ cushions in the Commons was thus consistent with its own status as a court. [↑](#endnote-ref-112)
113. *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I*, ed. Hartley, i, 194, 243. [↑](#endnote-ref-113)
114. *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I*, ed. Hartley, i, 244. [↑](#endnote-ref-114)
115. *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I*, ed. Hartley, i, 502-8; ii, 272-6, 434-8. [↑](#endnote-ref-115)
116. Dean, ‘Image and Ritual’, 270. [↑](#endnote-ref-116)
117. *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I*, ed. Hartley, i, 524. [↑](#endnote-ref-117)
118. *William Lambarde’s Notes*, ed. Ward, 59. [↑](#endnote-ref-118)
119. For example *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I*, ed. Hartley, iii, 85, 88, 94, 103. [↑](#endnote-ref-119)
120. *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I*, ed. Hartley, iii, 80. [↑](#endnote-ref-120)
121. *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I*, ed. Hartley, i, 245-6. [↑](#endnote-ref-121)
122. *Hooker’s Order and Usage*, ed. Snow, 178; *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I*, ed. Hartley, iii, 69. The practice of the Commons clerk reading the litany had apparently begun in Elizabeth’s first parliament in 1559: Norman L. Jones, *Faith by Statute: Parliament and the Settlement of Religion 1559* (London, 1982), 89. [↑](#endnote-ref-122)
123. *The Book of Common Prayer: The Texts of 1549, 1559, and 1662*, ed. Brian Cummings (Oxford, 2011), 117-23.  [↑](#endnote-ref-123)
124. *CJ*, i, 54. [↑](#endnote-ref-124)
125. On the subject of prayers for the monarchy in the reformed English liturgy see J.P.D. Cooper, ‘”O Lorde Save the Kyng”: Tudor Royal Propaganda and the Power of Prayer’, in *Authority and Consent in Tudor England*, ed. G.W. Bernard and S.J. Gunn (Albershot, 2002), 179-96. [↑](#endnote-ref-125)
126. *Book of Common Prayer 1559*, ed. Cummings, 118. [↑](#endnote-ref-126)
127. *Book of Common Prayer 1559*, ed. Cummings, 121. [↑](#endnote-ref-127)
128. *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I*, ed. Hartley, i, 134. The editor notes there is some doubt whether this ‘speech’ was delivered in the chamber as we have it. [↑](#endnote-ref-128)
129. *Book of Common Prayer 1559*, ed. Cummings, 118, 261. A prayer for parliament was printed in 1625: G.J. Cuming, *A History of Anglican Liturgy* (1982), 126. [↑](#endnote-ref-129)
130. *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I*, ed. Hartley, iii, 230. [↑](#endnote-ref-130)
131. *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I*, ed. Hartley, iii, 230 and n. 44 and 46, following the alternative readings of ‘cord’ for ‘boorde’ and ‘godlie’ for ‘ungodlie’. [↑](#endnote-ref-131)
132. *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII*, x, no 462; *Hooker’s Order and Usage*, ed. Snow, 180. [↑](#endnote-ref-132)
133. Kyle, *Theater of State*, 30. [↑](#endnote-ref-133)
134. Elton, *Parliament of England 1559-1581*, [ix]. [↑](#endnote-ref-134)