**Peacock feathers and Pater Nosters: The post-mortem identity of Sir Thomas Burgh (c.1430-1496)**

The multitude of ways in which the late medieval population wished to be commemorated after their departure from this earthly life has been the focus of much recent scholarship. The concept of commemoration in the later medieval period seems to have held a dual meaning for those considering post-mortem provision as they approached death – remembrance and salvation. People wanted to be remembered by successive generations after their death but they also wished to be remembered in a way that would secure the prayers and masses which they believed were necessary to speed their soul through purgatory and therefore ensure their salvation. Particularly for the upper echelons of medieval society, a large part of this process involved almost obsessive provision for the fixtures and fittings relating to the very ceremonies into which they wanted to weave remembrance of themselves, the people involved in these rituals and a permanent memorialisation of themselves within this context. Alongside this, concerns regarding the legacy of surviving family and desire to make provision for successive generations, resulted in a complex series of bequests and requests, as is particularly evident through surviving last will and testament records. The combination of these bequests and requests created a particular picture of the testator, and the image or identity that was created, was arguably a conscious choice on the part of the individual making the will, as they would have taken particular decisions regarding their wishes for the distribution of their wealth and possessions after their death.

Sir Thomas Burgh, who made his will in 1496, showed a heightened awareness of the necessity of making carefully planned post-mortem provision that would reflect his interests and position in life whilst also commemorating himself and his family after their deaths. The analysis of the commemorative provision of a late medieval knight such as Burgh makes a particularly interesting case study, as from the 1460s Burgh became Edward IV’s right hand man in Lincolnshire and was also one of the county’s key participants in the activities of the Wars of the Roses.[[1]](#footnote-1) Before examining Burgh’s commemorative identity in greater detail, to provide some context it is important to consider the status and roles that he held during the course of his life, his political affiliations and his role in local and national politics. Burgh was a member of an important Lincolnshire gentry family and in the late medieval period there were complex ideas surrounding the prerequisites of gentility, including concepts of good birth, service (both military and otherwise), wealth and types of land tenure.[[2]](#footnote-2) In gentry society, social leadership was identified with landed resources and wealth, perhaps income from land and rents, and shire officials were expected to be visible to the local population and yet accountable to the central authorities.[[3]](#footnote-3) The Lincolnshire gentry were drawn into fighting in the Wars of the Roses in response to the orders of their lords and patrons. Burgh was initially embroiled in the events of the Wars of the Roses through his allegiance to the Lancastrian lord, Henry Stafford (Duke of Buckingham 1460-1483).

Burgh’s rise to prominence in royal service reveals that the peaks and troughs of his career coincided with events in the Wars of the Roses and their repercussions.[[4]](#footnote-4) Born in 1430, Burgh was responsible for his family’s growing influence in local and national affairs. His father, also Thomas Burgh, had married Elizabeth Percy, one of the co-heiresses to a junior branch of the earls of Northumberland. Elizabeth had inherited from her father, Sir Henry Percy of Harthill, Yorkshire, and subsequently bequeathed to her son Thomas at her death in 1455, the manor of Gainsborough, some other lands in Lincolnshire and an estate in Northumberland centred on Mitford Castle.[[5]](#footnote-5) As mentioned previously, Burgh’s early political affiliations were with the Lancastrian Staffords: he was a member of the household of the Duke of Buckingham in 1456-7 and was one of the duke’s feoffees in 1458.[[6]](#footnote-6) Lincolnshire was considered to have traditionally Lancastrian loyalties, as the county contained many duchy of Lancaster estates.[[7]](#footnote-7) It should be noted, however, that Burgh placed his loyalty to the dukes of Buckingham below his ambitions to become a Crown servant.[[8]](#footnote-8) After the duke’s death at the Battle of Northampton, Burgh switched affinities and committed himself to the victorious Yorkists, by whom he was made sheriff of Lincolnshire in the autumn of 1460.[[9]](#footnote-9) This would have immediately boosted Burgh’s standing within Lincolnshire, as the holding of public office within the landed elites provided an obvious manifestation of their regional power and status, and the sheriff was the head of the shire in administrative terms.[[10]](#footnote-10) The sheriff was the king’s agent and retained prominence in local affairs through his position as head of the county courts, farmer of the shire and recipient of executive orders.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Burgh received an immediate elevation in status as he was made an Esquire of the King’s Body on 2 April 1461; this was merely four days after the Battle of Towton had confirmed Edward IV on the throne.[[12]](#footnote-12) As Esquire of the Body, Burgh would have waited personally on the king in his chamber and, as a trusted official, carried out duties which required reliability and discretion.[[13]](#footnote-13) Burgh was part of royal commissions from May 1461 onwards to supervise the confiscation of lands that were in the hands of noble and gentry families who had rebelled against Edward IV and also to encourage the Lincolnshire gentry to support Edward against attempted coups from Margaret of Anjou and her supporters.[[14]](#footnote-14) In July 1461 he was made steward of Edward IV’s holdings in Lincolnshire, including the extensive estates of Edmund Tudor, the former earl of Richmond, half-brother of Henry VI, who had died of plagues in 1456.[[15]](#footnote-15) Burgh had been knighted by February 1463, and must have shown administrative competence and an interest in noble sports, as he was Master of the King’s Horse by February 1464 and a Knight of the King’s Body by 1466.[[16]](#footnote-16) After being personally honoured by the king as a Knight of the Body, Burgh had a permanent and life-long membership to a privileged group which performed the central fixed routine of court ceremonial.[[17]](#footnote-17) Burgh’s rise in the king’s service was accompanied by generous patronage, including forfeited land in Lincolnshire and elsewhere.[[18]](#footnote-18) The largest available group of lands were those that had been attainted from the Tailboys’, another powerful Lincolnshire gentry family.[[19]](#footnote-19) By making Burgh the successor to the Tailboys’ lands, Jonathan Mackman has suggested that Edward IV was endowing his new local dignitary with immense wealth and land to reinforce his position but also trying to harness some of the local power of this major lordship to the benefit of the Crown.[[20]](#footnote-20)

There were also prestigious offices granted to Burgh from within the Duchy of Lancaster estates in Lincolnshire, particularly the constableships of Lincoln Castle and of Bolingbroke.[[21]](#footnote-21) The agglomeration of estates, lordships and honours attached to the Duchy of Lancaster was a private fiefdom, without parallel in late medieval England; it was exceptional in the extent of its territorial basis and the size of its indentured retinue.[[22]](#footnote-22) This would have greatly improved Burgh’s status in Lincolnshire and this is reflected in the fact that he was elected Knight of the Shire for the Parliaments of 1467 and 1478.[[23]](#footnote-23) Burgh was in regular attendance on Edward IV, for example in 1464 he aided the organisation of the victualling of the royal army going towards Scotland, and in 1468 acted as a commissioner at a trial for treason in Salisbury.[[24]](#footnote-24) Burgh served Edward on his expedition to France in 1475.[[25]](#footnote-25) His position of trust is further exemplified by the fact that before the end of his reign, the king had named him as a councillor and also helped him into an advantageous marriage to Margaret, dowager Lady Botreaux in 1464. Margaret brought to the marriage the income of her dower estates in Wiltshire, Somerset and Devon, and the prestige of marrying the daughter and widow of a peer of the realm.[[26]](#footnote-26)

It was at this high point of Burgh’s career that he jointly rented, along with residentiary canon Thomas Alford, one of the most desirable properties in Lincoln Cathedral close, the combined tenements of 4 and 5 Pottergate, between 1465 and 1470.[[27]](#footnote-27) Burgh then continued to hold the tenancy alone until the final quarter of 1472.[[28]](#footnote-28) He perhaps needed a base at Lincoln as a result of his increasing involvement in local affairs, and was prepared to place himself, a true Yorkist who owed his position entirely to the favour of Edward IV, in the midst of a community which could be described as identifying with the Lancastrian cause.[[29]](#footnote-29) Although Burgh clearly had links with the cathedral close community at the time of his death in 1496, many of those who had been part of the Lancastrian-sympathising chapter in the 1460s had died before him, so he had developed links with the next generation of higher clergy. Burgh’s executors included Geoffrey Simeon, who was chancellor at the time of Burgh’s death and William Skelton, treasurer, who had been key members of the cathedral chapter since the late 1470s/early 1480s.[[30]](#footnote-30)

Burgh’s local and national success in the 1460s was regarded jealously by other powerful gentry families. So it was no surprise that a group of insurgents, led by Sir Richard Welles and supported by Welles’ son Robert and his brothers-in-law Sir Thomas de la Laund and Sir Thomas Dymmock, took advantage of an opportunity to bring Burgh down a peg or two. In 1469, when Edward IV briefly lost control of the government to Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick, they attacked Burgh’s manor house at Gainsborough in an incident which precipitated the Lincolnshire Rebellion. Attacks on rivals’ houses and property were not uncommon throughout periods of political upheaval but the fact that this attack was against Burgh, the leader of the Yorkist administration in the county, meant that the incident was likely to be seen as much as an attack on Edward IV’s rule as upon Burgh himself.[[31]](#footnote-31) Yet Edward’s commitment to Burgh was made manifest when he amassed a force as a show of strength to the men of Lincolnshire, defeated the rebels at Empingham, a village west of Stamford, and executed the leading gentry involved.[[32]](#footnote-32)

Burgh retained a significant position in the county administration, remaining a member of the peace commission of Lindsey, for the remainder of Edward’s reign.[[33]](#footnote-33) When Edward led an army over to France in 1475, Burgh provided him with 160 archers when no other knight of the body raised more than 100.[[34]](#footnote-34) Burgh retained his royal posts such as the stewardship of Bolingbroke until he was replaced by Henry VII and he remained a regular at court for the rest of his career.[[35]](#footnote-35) He managed to successfully transfer to the new regime: Richard III entrusted Burgh to manage sensitive discussions with the duke of Brittany’s ambassador, whilst maintaining the local offices he held under Edward, and was also awarded the stewardship of the Isle of Axholme, as well as being granted lands worth £200 per year.[[36]](#footnote-36) Richard elected Burgh as one of his knights of the Order of the Garter suggesting that he respected the loyalty Burgh had shown to his brother Edward IV and wanted to be assured of a similar loyalty.[[37]](#footnote-37) Burgh fared less well after the accession of Henry VII as he lost most of his major county offices to Henry’s supporters, although he continued to be an active royal councillor and lent support to Henry on his progress through the northern counties in 1486.[[38]](#footnote-38) He continued to serve the king, taking an active part in commissions.[[39]](#footnote-39) His service was rewarded in 1487 with a summons to the House of Lords, although there is no evidence that he took his seat in the Lords; in his will he described himself simply as Sir Thomas Burgh, knight.[[40]](#footnote-40) At the time of his death, Burgh was a man of means, a knight who had served the country well and been handsomely rewarded. He even managed to survive several regime changes, retaining a good proportion of the lands and titles that he had amassed throughout his career.[[41]](#footnote-41)

It is clear that Burgh was a key military and political figure in Lincolnshire, as well as having influence at court throughout the later fifteenth century. How would such a notable figurehead create a legacy for himself and his family in advance of his death? Burgh’s aspirations for styling himself as part of the Lincolnshire rural elite began with the construction of his majestic country house at Gainsborough.[[42]](#footnote-42) Documentary evidence for the construction of Gainsborough Old Hall is not plentiful and it is unclear how much of Burgh’s manor house was destroyed in the incident with Sir Richard Welles and his allies. For many years it was believed that the manor house was mostly constructed post-1469, after this attack.[[43]](#footnote-43) However archaeological evidence suggests that the hall was not built in a single phase but instead developed over a period of twenty years.[[44]](#footnote-44) Gainsborough Old Hall was an impressive building with a large Great Hall, a west wing which contained four bays of lodgings, each with a projecting fireplace and privy, an east wing which contained the state apartments, the north-west corner block which contained a large kitchen and in the north-east stood an imposing octagonal tower.[[45]](#footnote-45) An incomplete inventory for the household goods in the hall survives from after Burgh’s death in 1496 and strongly suggests that the ‘splendour of the house matched its size’, as many of the rooms would have been decorated with tapestries and the bed in the tower chamber was covered with a canopy made of chequered velvet and cloth of gold.[[46]](#footnote-46) This house was a magnificent statement of how Burgh wished others to see him during life: rich with the latest fashions in art and architecture, the model of opulence locally. Despite moving away from Lincoln Cathedral close, and focusing on the development of his manor at Gainsborough, Burgh maintained strong ties with the clergy of Lincoln, particularly to cathedral dignitaries, Geoffrey Simeon (dean) and William Skelton (treasurer), whom he made two of the executors of his will.

Burgh’s last will and testament was proved before the Prerogative Court of Canterbury, the highest ecclesiastical court in England, on the 19th May 1496.[[47]](#footnote-47) Wills have long been a key source for the study of medieval piety and commemoration and much has already been written about the benefits and limitations of using testamentary evidence as a source. Some historians, such as Clive Burgess, have argued that it is almost impossible to gain a reliable impression of pious intentions from testamentary evidence.[[48]](#footnote-48) Burgess believes that one’s pious actions, along with repentance and confession during lifetime, were the true measure of pious intent and that wills may give false impressions, as comparably smaller scale provisions made within the wills were little more than the ‘icing on the cake’.[[49]](#footnote-49) Whilst it is important to acknowledge that this might be true to some extent, Rob Lutton has indicated that when wills are compared to parish and guild records, they usually reflect testators’ lifetime interests.[[50]](#footnote-50) Although they do not always represent the extent and wealth of religious giving during an individual testator’s lifetime sufficiently, they do not typically deviate widely from them. And despite Burgess’ criticisms that wills by their nature were biased by age and focus on after-death provision,[[51]](#footnote-51) Robert Swanson convincingly argues that bequests made at the pivotal point between life and death were the most important of all pious acts because it was the testator's’ last opportunity to express their religiosity.[[52]](#footnote-52) In addition to this, when considering the importance of religious material bequests, bequests of religious items that had either been commissioned by or had been owned and used by the testator would surely have reflected how they identified with their religion.

It was not unusual at this time for male members of the gentry class to expend time and money on their post-mortem provision.[[53]](#footnote-53) The wealthy man was considered to be merely a steward of his God-given wealth and was obliged to dispose of it in a pious and charitable manner or jeopardise the fate of his soul.[[54]](#footnote-54) However Burgh’s will provides an excellent example of how a member of the gentry class whose fortunes had recently and radically improved might impose his post-mortem priorities on his commemorative bequests and requests. At the time that he made his will, prior to his death on 18 March 1496, Burgh had recently provided the funds to build a chapel in his local parish church of All Saints, Gainsborough.[[55]](#footnote-55) It seems probable from his will that it was Burgh’s intention to weave himself into the sacred space of this local church and his own personality upon it, requesting for his body: ‘wheresoever it happen to decease to be buried in my newe chapel’, which had clearly had an impact upon his personal piety.[[56]](#footnote-56) Considering his status in the county and the relationship which he had retained with some cathedral dignitaries it is likely that he could have requested burial in Lincoln Cathedral, but chose instead to focus commemoration of himself and his wife on his local church, where he had regularly worshipped and which he had interacted with on a regular basis during his life. This would have been an important space which would have helped to shape Burgh’s personal piety during his visits, whether they were weekly or more frequent.

Burgh requested that a tomb should be constructed for himself and his wife at the north end of the altar of the chapel in All Saints.[[57]](#footnote-57) Margaret had died in 1488 and Burgh wanted burying beside her, in his new chapel. Burgh gave very specific details about how he wished for himself and his wife to be represented on this tomb: he wanted an effigy of himself, wearing his mantel of the garter with a garter around his leg, bearing arms, and of his wife, with remembrance of their heraldry and the day of their obits. Burgh’s choice to be portrayed carrying a weapon and wearing the insignia of The Most Noble Order of the Garter, the highest order of chivalry, indicates his wish to convey the importance of his status on the national and international stage alongside a desire to evoke associations with the ideal of the traditional chivalric gentleman. It demonstrates his pride in his military achievements and the royal recognition of his family’s loyalty. This idea is reinforced by Burgh’s request to include armorial shields on his monument, to demonstrate his lineage and connections. Heraldry was the language of the gentry and nobility, who used it to set themselves apart from the lower orders and to differentiate themselves from each other according to the ranks of degree.[[58]](#footnote-58) Funeral monuments that ‘advertised the individual’s temporal glories and mortal decay’ ensured that the imagery of their death was accompanied by the appropriate emblems identifying their position in life.[[59]](#footnote-59) It was also a representation of Burgh’s social success and Burgh’s use of heraldry and style of monument suggests that this was the identity he wished to project.

A major concern for Burgh was to speed his soul through purgatory by ensuring the arrangement of as many soul-saving masses as possible and he left complicated instructions to ensure that this aspect of his post-mortem commemoration was well provided for. The celebration of mass was central to pre-Reformation Christianity as it was believed that through the sacrifice of the mass, the redemption of the world following Christ’s sacrifice on the Cross, was renewed and made fruitful for the faithful.[[60]](#footnote-60) Also included in the mass were prayers to honour God and the saints, prayers for the well-being of the living and prayers for the benefit of deceased Christians. The liturgy of the mass made the absent present in a non-physical way; it also enhanced community by bringing the living closer to members of the Church who had died.[[61]](#footnote-61) Burgh made provision for a perpetual obit, to be held at All Saints’ parish church in Gainsborough, for the soul of himself, his wife, his parents, his ancestors and all Christian souls.[[62]](#footnote-62) The gentry showed a keen concern to perpetuate their family name as in some sense this ensured a kind of ‘temporal immortality’.[[63]](#footnote-63) Burgh’s requests for services dedicated to named persons reflects the growing trend in late medieval Christianity towards private devotions and an emphasis on the importance of the naming of the individual soul in liturgy and prayer.[[64]](#footnote-64)

Burgh made exceedingly detailed provision for his obit, specifying exactly how he wanted the 26s 8d, which he put aside for the obit, to be spent each year. He broke it down as follows: 20d to the vicar of the church at the obit, 12d to each chantry chaplain singing at his obit, 8d to each other priest, 12d to the clerk of the church for ringing the bells, 2d each to five other clerks singing and reading at his obit, 2d to twelve of the poorest men and women of the town and parish to be present annually at his obit and to pray for the souls of him and his wife and the remainder to be spent on wax for lights, bread and ale and other good works of mercy after his obit.[[65]](#footnote-65) The specificity of Burgh’s requests creates the impression that he was anxious to solicit regular prayers each year for the good of his soul, as he took measures to ensure that people would be aware of his annual ritual of remembrance, for example, paying for the bells to be rung to alert people about the service and providing food and drink afterwards to encourage them to attend. It also suggests that he was keen to ensure that he was remembered by the local community that he had established at Gainsborough and to make this remembrance not only a spiritual ceremony but a charitable event of remembrance in his name.

Most pressing however, was Burgh’s desire to provide for his perpetual chantry. Colin Richmond describes Burgh’s will as being: ‘as pedantic as that of any lawyer’ in its directions for the establishment of his chantry.[[66]](#footnote-66) Many gentry wills that indicate a wish to establish a chantry often lack detailed information about the type of foundation that they intend to set up, which Clive Burgess has suggested could indicate that many founders viewed the ordination of a chantry as provision of a parish amenity.[[67]](#footnote-67) If this were the case, then Burgh’s attempted ‘testamentary micro-management’ of his chantry might suggest that he viewed it more as his own personal form of commemoration, primarily for the benefit of his family and his heirs. The endowment for Burgh’s perpetual chantry at the altar of St Mary the Virgin in the new chapel at All Saints church was finalised after his executors applied to the Crown for a licence in January 1499.[[68]](#footnote-68) In his will, Burgh assigned a particularly generous annual stipend of £10 for the chaplain of his chantry, from the endowment of rents from his lordship of Tunstall in Staffordshire, along with other unspecified lands and tenements plus their appurtenances.[[69]](#footnote-69) However, the chaplain would have earned their money, as serving Burgh’s chantry was a role more strictly governed by the founder’s instructions than other such arrangements. There are sixteen lines of Burgh’s will dedicated to outlining the circumstances concerning how, by whom, and in default of whom, and in what eventuality the chantry chaplain should be appointed; the length of time and the periods of the year that the chaplain might be permitted to be away from the chantry and the arrangements he should make for a deputy; the arrangements that should be made if the chaplain should be ill and his carefully prescribed living arrangements.[[70]](#footnote-70) Burgh also made generous material provision for his chantry, as he wanted to make every effort to ensure that it would be able to operate as quickly as possible after his death and also that Divine Service could be appropriately celebrated. Among other things, Burgh bequeathed a mass book, a chalice, his best grail, an antiphonal with a processional, a silver candlestick, some silver dishes and a silver paxbred to the use of his chantry.[[71]](#footnote-71) These items would have had functional uses, they were necessary items for the provision and maintenance of the religious services. But Burgh’s bequests of cloth for ecclesiastical uses make an important statement:

‘I bequeath to my said chantre[chantry] my white sute[suit] of vestments, a cope and ij tapetts [tippets] of the same with ij curtains of white saccanett[sarcenet] for mine auter[altar] there. Also my sewte[suit] of peycoke[peacock] feathers for mine obite[obit] keeping there and a cope to be made for the same for my said chantry’.[[72]](#footnote-72)

The suit made of peacock feathers most likely refers to a set or suit of costumes intended to be worn together, with peacock feathers embroidered onto them, and the cope referred to was probably intended to be made to match the suit, with embroidered peacock feathers.[[73]](#footnote-73) This would have been a unique commission, as standard vestment decoration in the later medieval period was usually restricted to more generic motifs such as seraphim, bells, lillies or double-headed eagles.[[74]](#footnote-74) Peacocks were cultural symbols of prestige and this bird might have been particularly favoured by Burgh, bearing in mind his penchant for ostentation and grandiloquent display.[[75]](#footnote-75) There were likely to have been peacocks on Burgh’s estate, which would probably have been roasted by his household, although perhaps not eaten as the meat was considered tough and unpleasant.[[76]](#footnote-76) It had become a tradition in aristocratic households to replace the feathers of the peacock after roasting to create a spectacular centrepiece, and add vivid green and blue colours to the table decoration, as a signifier of Burgh’s wealth and status.[[77]](#footnote-77) If Burgh shared an affinity with the peacock, a bird which has been associated with symbolising vainglory, we should not perhaps be too surprised.[[78]](#footnote-78) However, peacocks had a wide range of symbolism in the medieval period; the images in bestiaries demonstrated to the medieval populace how the peacock shed its feathers every year and then grew new ones, so because of this a belief developed that the peacock’s flesh did not decay after death, and therefore the peacock became a symbol of the immortal Christ.[[79]](#footnote-79) In addition to this, the pattern on peacock feathers, which resembles an eye, has been associated with the all-seeing eye of God, and a symbol of foresight.[[80]](#footnote-80) A vestment embroidered with peacock feathers would have been an expensive donation but would have made an important statement about Burgh’s wealth and status. In addition to this, the representation of peacock feathers on a vestment that would be worn for the celebration of mass might tie in with the idea that Christ sees all things and that whilst no-one escapes death, masses and prayers are the way to true Salvation.

On the whole, the set of bequests for Burgh’s chantry are quite lavish, including numerous valuable silver items, and this appears to stem from his profound concern for the continual maintenance of his chantry. This idea is reinforced by the fact that the first two folios of Burgh’s will are dedicated to the provision of complex rules and regulations attempting to control every aspect of his chantry masses.[[81]](#footnote-81) Burgh made a prescriptive weekly timetable outlining the specific masses and prayers that he wanted to form part of his chantry mass devotions. He requested that his chantry chaplain should sing mass of the Holy Trinity on Sundays, mass of the Holy Spirit on Mondays, mass of Mary Magdalene on Tuesdays, mass of requiem on Wednesdays, mass of All Saints on Thursdays, mass of Jesus Christ on Fridays and mass of St Mary on Saturdays.[[82]](#footnote-82) After the offertory at each Mass, and at the time that he went to prepare the vessels for consecration, the chantry chaplain was instructed to recite the psalm De Profundis with the collect Festina Fidelius for the souls of Burgh and his wife, rehearsing their names, and also for the souls of his parents, ancestors and also for future generations of the Burgh family: ‘other suche as comythe of me’.[[83]](#footnote-83) Principal and high feasts were the only exception to this timetable, when Burgh wanted his chantry chaplain to say mass of the feast with a remembrance of the mass that should have been timetabled for that particular day.

Burgh’s chantry mass timetable was an unusual request, not all testators were so prescriptive with their devotional requests and were usually prepared to leave the celebration of their chantry mass to the discretion of the celebrant and the liturgical calendar. Burgh is indicating here a particular devotion to the Holy Trinity, the Blessed Virgin Mary, All Saints and interestingly Mary Magdalene. He was clearly concerned that his perpetual chantry should reflect his personal liturgical tastes and encompass a wide range of personal devotions. It was not just the content of the masses that Burgh was keen to specify, it was also the timings. He requested that they should take place at 9am or after and before mass, the chantry priest was instructed to ring the: ‘second or thirde grete belle so long space before he goe to masse as a man may easly go from my Maner to the said churche’.[[84]](#footnote-84) These masses were clearly designed to benefit future generations of the Burgh household and the timing of these masses was carefully considered to encourage attendance and, therefore prayers, at Burgh’s daily masses of remembrance.

The fabric of the mass was clearly a keen matter of interest for Burgh in his will and he shows an understanding that contributing towards the provision of high quality and attractive clerical vestments, which would add to the spectacle and ceremony of the mass, could be considered a pious work. To the high altar of All Saints church, Burgh bequeathed a purple vestment that he already owned, which he wanted to have embellished with cloth of gold at his expense.[[85]](#footnote-85) And Burgh also made bequests of chasubles, the principal vestment worn by the priest, to the local abbeys of Barlings, Revesby, Mattersey and Monk Bretton.[[86]](#footnote-86) Burgh also remembered Lincoln Cathedral when making this type of donation, requesting that his horse trapper of blue cloth of gold and black velvet, embroidered with ‘main de fer’ or mailed fists (which Burgh used as his emblem) were to be given to the cathedral, to be made into a cope and a vestment plus two tunicles for a priest, deacon and subdeacon at the Cathedral, and then to be decorated with decorative panels, orphreys and embroidery, as much as he could afford.[[87]](#footnote-87) By reappropriating this ceremonial garment, a representation of his knightly status with his emblem, made of luxurious fabrics, Burgh was offering some of the fruits of his secular role and status as a pious gift to the Church. It was usual practice for expensive secular garments or furnishings to be re-purposed for church vestments after the death of the owner, as this would emphasise the power of the Burgh family in the local community.[[88]](#footnote-88) This might suggest that throughout Burgh’s residence in the close, he had developed a relationship with the cathedral which had impacted upon his spirituality and that he wanted to acknowledge this when making his will over twenty years later, by providing beautifully decorated attire for the clergy to wear as they celebrated mass.

The other foundation that Burgh established in Gainsborough was an almshouse. He requested that his executors should establish five poor bedesmen in the parish of All Saints, who were to be paid 1d per day to attend Burgh’s chantry masses and pray for his soul. The poor men were to be chosen from those who had done service to him or to his heirs, but could no longer serve or from those who were tenants of him or his heirs and had fallen into poverty. Each bedeman was to receive a new gown every other year priced 3s 4d.[[89]](#footnote-89) Similarly to Burgh’s chantry chaplain though, his bedesmen would certainly have earned their place in the almshouse as Burgh was incredibly specific about the day-to-day activities of his bedesmen. Burgh directed that in addition to attending his chantry mass, if the bedesmen were literate, they were to recite daily matins, prime and the hours and Evensong of Our Lady; also once a day recite the psalter of the Virgin Mary on his knees in the Burgh chapel in the parish church, and also accompany the priest by saying the words of the prayer ‘de profundis’ along with him during the mass.[[90]](#footnote-90) If the bedesmen were illiterate, they were required to know by heart the pater noster and ave maria prayers and the creed – if not, they were not permitted to be a bedesmen. Burgh’s illiterate bedesmen also had to know the psalter of the Virgin Mary, as they had to recite it twice daily on their knees in the chapel.[[91]](#footnote-91) At all times, the bedesmen had to be engaged with ‘rememorying’ the souls of Thomas and all the other Burghs. This indicates that Burgh’s concept of charity and concern for the poor was specifically limited locally to the poor immediately connected to his family and parish, and again with ensuring that his family’s name was remembered specifically through these efficacious prayers of the poor.

Similarities can be drawn between the provision made by Burgh and that of another fifteenth-century Lincolnshire magnate, Ralph Cromwell, third Baron Cromwell, although Burgh was obviously from a lower social class. Cromwell’s career advanced in the service of Henry V and VI and he took on leading administrative roles, culminating in Treasurer of England, and managed to retain a position of good standing in spite of various political difficulties.[[92]](#footnote-92) Cromwell cemented his position in Lincolnshire through ambitious building projects, such as the refurbishment of Tattershall castle (completed 1446) and the erection of a new church next to it, Holy Trinity. Cromwell also looked ahead to his post-mortem provision during his life, and at the height of his career as treasurer in July 1439 he obtained a licence from the Crown to transform Holy Trinity church into a collegiate church of seven chaplains, six secular clerks and six choristers and also to erect a perpetual almshouse for thirteen poor people near the cemetery, with licence to endow the foundations with up to £200 per year.[[93]](#footnote-93) Although Cromwell made several versions of his will, the overarching desire to provide lavishly for the health of his soul remained the same in all of them.[[94]](#footnote-94) The key concerns for both men, who had increased their wealth and status throughout their careers, was to focus on a physical legacy of building and improvement that would outlast them and to make provision for the most lavish foundations and pious gifts within their means, which had their personal commemoration at the centre.

At the point of Burgh’s death, he had successfully improved the local and national standing of his family through his rewarding career in royal service which had allowed him to develop his power and influence locally. This meant that Burgh was well-placed to extend his influence beyond his death and into the commemorative sphere of his social environment. Regardless of whether or not self-interest was Burgh’s main motivation for funding different types of commemorative provision at his parish of All Saints, by concentrating most of his provision locally, the wider community of the parish still benefited.[[95]](#footnote-95) Burgh’s role as lord of the manor of Gainsborough was clearly an important part of his identity and therefore his local parish church became the focus of his post-mortem provision. Burgh’s will has revealed an interesting series of meticulous instructions for material bequests and requests which would have been carefully crafted in order to create a particular post-mortem identity and legacy for himself and his family. However, the full picture is clearly more complicated. When we try to explain the contextualised significance of bequests and we think of them as links in a complex chain of interaction, expectation, bonding and social control, the meanings can prove difficult to untangle.[[96]](#footnote-96) To quote Miri Rubin: ‘Identity is as elusive as it is central to individual lives and collective experience’.[[97]](#footnote-97)

Burgh’s anxiety for post-mortem insurance might appear obsessive but there are other examples of fifteenth-century lay men of gentle status whose fear of death and worse, damnation and anonymity, pushed them to do everything in their power to mitigate the suffering of their soul and bring them closer to salvation and remembrance, although few bear such extraordinary attention to detail.[[98]](#footnote-98) The elaborate provision he makes, bequeathing luxury fabrics for vestments, as well as producing a complex timetable of masses for his chantry indicative of his personal devotions, serves to underline his personal piety, whilst also creating an impression of his wealth and therefore his powerful position in society. The monument that he commissioned for himself and his wife reinforces this idea; he requested to be depicted bearing arms and with his family shields, proclaiming his lineage and connections and thus presenting an image of a person worthy of commemoration. The success of a layman in life was, in this way, equated with the worthiness of commemoration in death. Thomas Burgh appears to have had an understanding that, whilst it was desirable to highlight his worldly social status and wealth through his post-mortem provision, it was also essential to emphasise his earthly piety, in preparation for heaven.

1. This article was developed from a paper presented at the Lincoln Record Society 2019 conference ‘Lincolnshire and the Wars of the Roses’. With grateful thanks to conference participants Dr Paul Dryburgh, Dr Nicholas Bennett and Dr Rachel Delman for their comments on this piece. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. P. Maddern, ‘Gentility’ in R. Radulescu and A. Truelove (eds), *Gentry Culture in Late Medieval England* (Manchester, 2005), p. 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. R. Gorski, *The fourteenth-century sheriff : English local administration in the late middle ages* (Woodbridge, 2003), p. 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Burgh was one of many gentry in the localities who consolidated and enhanced their positions during the Wars of the Roses through a combination of interests and activities such as local service, useful marriage, the building up of an estate and attachment to a patron – see for example: J. T. Driver, ‘A fifteenth-century Leicestershire lawyer and Parliamentary Knight of the Shire: Thomas Palmer of Holt (c. 1400-1475)’, *The Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society Transactions*, 69 (1995), 42-58; J. T. Driver, ‘The Career and Affiliations of Sir Roger Tocotes of Bromham (c. 1430-92): a Political Survivor in late Fifteenth-Century England’, *Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Magazine*, 98 (2005), pp. 307-315. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. S. Gunn, ‘The rise of the Burgh Family, c. 1431-1550’ in P. Lindley (ed.) *Gainsborough Old Hall, Occasional Papers in Lincolnshire History and Archaeology* 8 (1991), p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. R. Horrox, ‘Burgh, Thomas, Baron Burgh (*c.*1430–1496)’, *ODNB*, *Volume 8, Brown-Burstow* (Oxford, 2004), p. 787. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See: H. Castor, *The King, the crown, and the Duchy of Lancaster: public authority and private power, 1399-1461* (Oxford, 2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. C. Rawcliffe, *The Staffords, earls of Stafford and dukes of Buckingham, 1394-1521* (Cambridge, 1978), p. 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. S. Payling, ‘The widening franchise – parliamentary elections in Lancastrian Nottinghamshire’, in D. Williams (ed.), *England in the Fifteenth Century* (Woodbridge, 1987), pp. 167-185. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. H. Jewell, *English local administration in the Middle Ages* (Newton Abbot, 1972), p. 184. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Jewell, *Local Administration,* p. 186. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *CPR 1461-1467*, p. 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Gunn, ‘Burgh family’, p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *CPR 1461-1467*, p. 30, 34, 101, 205. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *CPR 1461-1467*, p. 94, 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *CPR 1461-1467*, p. 208, 343; *CPR 1476-1483*, 339; Horrox, ‘Burgh’, p. 787. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. D. Morgan, ‘The king’s affinity in the polity of Yorkist England’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th series: 23 (1973), p. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. *CPR 1461-1467*, p. 112, p.141, p. 151, p. 197, pp. 371-372; *CPR 1467-1477*, p. 310, 518; *CPR 1476-1483*, p. 208 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *CPR 1461-1467*, p. 112, p.141, p. 151. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. J. Mackman, ‘The Lincolnshire gentry and the Wars of the Roses’, (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of York, 1999), p.174. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. *CPR 1461-1467*, p. 120; *CPR 1467-1477*, p. 411 Horrox, ‘Burgh’, p. 787. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Castor, *The king*, p. 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Gunn, ‘Burgh family’, p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. R. Storey, ‘Lincolnshire and the Wars of the Roses’, *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, 14 (1970), p. 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. *CPR 1467-1477*, p. 523. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. *CIPM*, iv, p. 389 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. S. Jones, K. Major, and J. Varley, *The survey of ancient houses in Lincoln: I: Priorygate to Pottergate* (Lincoln, 1984), p. 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Jones, Major and Varley, *Survey of ancient houses*, p. 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Some evidence from the Chapter Acts of Lincoln Cathedral suggests that the Cathedral Chapter sympathised with the Lancastrian rulers, for example, an entry dated 7 February 1461 shows that the Dean and Chapter loaned 600 marks to Margaret of Anjou, on her journey to London to gain support for the Lancastrian cause and to free Henry VI from his imprisonment: LAO D&C A/2/34 f. 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. J. Le Neve and H. P. F. King, *Fasti Ecclesiae Anglicanae 1300-1541, 1: Lincoln Diocese* (London, 1962), p. 24; 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Earlier examples include the complaint made by Sir Godfrey Hilton that no less than thirteen of his gentry neighbours, along with approximately 140 retainers, had attacked his manor at Swine, East Yorkshire, and had broken his closes and entered his houses, removing crops and trees to the value of £40; CPR 1429-36, p.275. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Nichols, *Chronicle*, p. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Mackman, ‘Lincolnshire gentry’, p. 226. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. *CPR 1467-1477*, p. 523; Horrox, ‘Burgh’, p. 788. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Mackman, ‘Lincolnshire gentry’, p. 228. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. *CPR 1476-1485*, p. 385; Gunn, ‘Burgh family’, p. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. A. Sutton and L. Visser-Fuchs,‘ “Chevalerie…in som partie is worthi forto be comendid, and in some part to ben amendid” : chivalry and the Yorkist kings’ in C. Richmond and E. Scarff (eds), *St George’s Chapel, Windsor, in the Late Middle Ages* (Windsor, 2003), p. 127. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. *CPR 1485-1494*, p. 534; Gunn, ‘Burgh family’, p. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. *CPR 1485-1494*, p. 106, 107, 149, 213, 355. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Horrox, ‘Burgh’, p. 788; TNA PROB 11/10, f. 29v. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. *CPR 1485-1494*, p. 85; 312. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. A. Quiney, *Town houses of medieval Britain* (London, 2003), p. 201. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. P. Lindley, ‘Structure, Sequence and Status: the Architectural History of Gainsborough Old Hall to c.1600’ in P. Lindley (ed.), *Gainsborough Old Hall, Occasional Papers in Lincolnshire History and Archaeology* 8 (1991), p. 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. D. Stocker, ‘Stranger on the Shore: Gainsborough Old Hall – Yorkist ‘Merchant Chique’ in Lancastrian Lincolnshire’ in C. Woolgar (ed.), *The Elite Household in England, 1100-1550* (Donington, 2018), p. 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Quiney, *Townhouses*, 196. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. TNA PROB 2/124; Gunn, ‘Burgh family’, p. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. TNA PROB 11/10 fos. 29v-31v. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. C. Burgess, ‘Late Medieval Wills and Pious Convention: Testamentary Evidence Reconsidered’ in M. Hicks (ed.) *Profit, piety and professions in later medieval England* (Gloucester, 1990), Burgess, p. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Burgess, ‘Late medieval wills’, p. 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. R. Lutton, *Lollardy and orthodox religion in pre-reformation England: Reconstructing piety* (Woodbridge, 2006), p. 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. C. Burgess, ‘Late Medieval Wills and Pious Convention: Testamentary Evidence Reconsidered’ in M. Hicks (ed.) *Profit, piety and professions in later medieval England* (Gloucester, 1990), p. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. R. Swanson, *Religion and Devotion in Europe c.1215-c.1515* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 322. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. See, for example: C. Richmond, ‘The English Gentry and Religion, c.1500’ in C. Harper-Bill (ed.), *Religious Belief and Ecclesiastical Careers in Late Medieval England* (Woodbridge, 1991), pp. 121-150; P. W. Fleming, ‘Charity, Faith and the Gentry of Kent 1422-1529’ in A. J. Pollard (ed.), *Property and Politics: Essays in Later Mediaeval English History* (Gloucester, 1984), pp. 36-58; M. Bennett, *Community, Class and Careerism: Cheshire and Lancashire Society in the Age of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Cambridge, 1983), p. 230; S. M. Wright, *The Derbyshire Gentry in the Fifteenth century* (Chesterfield, 1983), pp. 53-59; N. Saul, *Lordship and faith : the English gentry and the parish church in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2017); C. Carpenter, ‘Religion’ in R. Radulescu and A. Truelove (eds), *Gentry culture in late medieval* England (Manchester, 2005), pp. 134-150; Although the focus of this article is on the post-mortem giving of male gentry, there is a considerable body of literature relating to female pious and charitable giving. See, for example: K. French, *The Good Women of the Parish: Gender and Religion After the Black Death* (Philadelphia, 2007); C. Peters, *Patterns of Piety: Women, gender and religion in late medieval and Reformation England*, 3rd edn (Cambridge, 2008); J. Loengard, ‘ “Which may be said to be her own”: widows and goods in late medieval England’ in M. Kowaleski and P.J.J. Goldberg (eds), *Medieval Domesticity: Home, Housing and Household in Medieval England* (Cambridge, 2008), pp. 162-176; P. Cullum, ‘ “And Hir name was Charite”: Charitable Giving by and for Women in Late Medieval Yorkshire’ in P.J.P Goldberg (ed), *Woman is a worthy wight: Women in English Society c. 1200-1500* (Stroud, 1992), pp. 182-211; C. Steer, ‘Commemoration and Women in Medieval London’, in M. Davies and A. Prescott (eds), *London and the Kingdom: Essays in Honour of Caroline M. Barron* (Donington, 2008), pp. 230-245. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Fleming, ‘Charity, Faith and the Gentry of Kent’, p. 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. TNA PROB 11/10 f. 29v. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. TNA PROB 11/10 f. 29v. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. TNA PROB 11/10 f. 29v. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
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62. TNA PROB 11/10, f. 29v.. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Fleming, ‘Charity, Faith and the Gentry of Kent’, p. 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. C. Carpenter, ‘The Religion of the Gentry of Fifteenth-Century England’ in D. William (ed.), *England in the Fifteenth Century* (Woodbridge, 1987), pp. 63-64. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. TNA PROB 11/10, f. 30r. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. C. Richmond, ‘Religion’ in R. Horrox (ed.) *Fifteenth Century Attitudes: Perceptions of society in late medieval England* (Cambridge, 1994), p. 198. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. This is certainly the case for late medieval Bristol: C. Burgess, ‘Chantries in the Parish, or “Through the Looking-glass”’, *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, 164 (2011), p. 107; C. Burgess and B. Kümin, ‘Penitential Bequests and Parish Regimes in Late Medieval England’, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 44:4 (1993), p. 614. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. CPR 1494-1509, p. 171 [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. TNA PROB 11/10, f. 29v-30r. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. TNA PROB/11/10 f, 30r. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. TNA PROB 11/10, f. 31r. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. TNA PROB 11/10, f. 31r. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
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76. ‘Peacocks’, *The Illustrated Magazine of Art*, 1:3 (1853), p. 143 [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. ‘Peacocks’, p. 143; C. M. Woolgar, ‘Medieval food and colour’, *Journal of Medieval History* (2018)

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80. E. P. Evans, *Animal Symbolism in Ecclesiastical Architecture* (London, 1896), p. 154. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. TNA PROB 11/10, fos 30r-31v. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. TNA PROB 11/10, f. 30r. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. TNA PROB 11/10, f. 30r. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. TNA PROB 11/10, f. 30r. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. TNA PROB 11/10, f. 31r. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. TNA PROB 11/10, f. 31r. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. A horse trapper was an ornamental cloth that was embroidered and worn over the back of horses for ceremonies. TNA PROB 11/10, f. 30v. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Woolley, ‘Vestments and other Textiles’, p. 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. TNA PROB/11/10, fo. 31r [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. TNA PROB/11/10, fo. 31r [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
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96. J. Rosenthal, ‘Clerical Book Bequests: A Vade Mecum, But Whence and Whither?’ in C. Barron and J. Stratford (eds), *The Church and Learning in later Medieval society: Essays in honour of R. B. Dobson* (Donington, 2002), p. 341. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
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98. See, for example, Colin Richmond’s discussion of the wills of Geoffrey Downes and Sir John Percevale, in: Richmond, ‘The English Gentry and Religion’, pp. 121-125; pp. 126-127. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)