# Report on the 2015 Harlaxton Symposium, Saints and their Cults in the Middle Ages

I applied for a Dobson Scholarship to attend this year’s Harlaxton Symposium, *Saints and their Cults in the Middle Ages*, as the theme encompassed many areas of research which are closely related to my doctoral thesis on the fifteenth-century St Cuthbert Window at York Minster. I am undertaking an interdisciplinary investigation of the hagiographic narrative of the window, combining art-historical research with technical analysis of the stained glass and its conservation history. Through this I hope to establish the hagiographic significance of the window, as few such large-scale narratives survive in stained glass and the extant examples are relatively understudied in comparison to similar cycles in other media. I was attracted to Harlaxton’s interdisciplinary programme and the sheer range of subjects and media presented by the twenty-eight speakers did not disappoint. The diversity of the questions and discussions taking place demonstrated the value of interdisciplinary scholarship as a means of enhancing research and facilitating knowledge exchange.

Jane Rutherford’s discussion of the fifteenth-century wall paintings at St Cadoc’s, Llancarfan, was particularly interesting, given the proximity in date to the St Cuthbert window and her suggestion that many of the unique iconographic aspects of the scheme reflect contemporary local devotion. Similarly, John Scattergood’s examination of the motives behind the construction of the alliterative poem *St Erkenwald* was thought-provoking, not only because it is presented as a saint’s life and draws inspiration from Bede, but also due to Scattergood’s suggestion that aspects of the poem attempt to provide a social commentary. Other papers, such as David Lepine’s paper on ‘Patterns of Devotion to Saints Among the Late Medieval Higher Clergy’, Richard Marks’ paper on ‘Images of the Saints in English Medieval Stained Glass and their Functions’ and Sarah Brown’s paper, ‘Archbishop Scrope’s Lost Window in York Minster’ helped deepen my understanding of the contemporary devotional context within which Thomas Langley, the donor of the St Cuthbert window worked. Several papers highlighted the different approaches that may be taken to negotiate the difficulties presented by the limited survival and quality of source materials and physical evidence.

In addition, Nigel Morgan and Julian Luxford’s respective discussions, of the spread of the Sarum Calendar in the fourteenth-century and the forms and potential functions of relic lists, demonstrated the range of sources and avenues for research into the contemporary devotional context. The way in which such sources can provide crucial evidence for devotional practical and specific veneration has led me to consider them more closely as part of my study of the physical and socio-political context of the St Cuthbert window.

Beyond the papers and discussions which were particularly relevant to my research, the quality of the research presented made it difficult not to find the presentations both engaging and thought-provoking. Similarly, the excursions to Thorney Abbey and Crowland Abbey encapsulated the essence of the interdisciplinary format of the Symposium and were both enjoyable and incredibly informative. It was a privilege to be able to experience and discuss the history, art, architecture and interpretations of these amazing places with experts in their fields, particularly as Jenny Alexander and Louise Hampson had presented aspects of their research immediately before the visits.

I am incredibly grateful to have been given the opportunity to attend Harlaxton, not only for the academic insights which I have gained as a result, but also for the uniquely rewarding experience it offered. As a Dobson Scholar at the start of my career I was made to feel very welcome and many delegates took an interest in my research, providing a great deal of valuable advice and suggestions. The evocative setting and engaging site visits provided a fruitful atmosphere for discussion and I benefitted from many stimulating conversations with fellow participants. My experience of the Symposium has reinforced my enthusiasm for my research and inspired me to pursue a number of new avenues of investigation, which have already had a positive impact upon the development of my thesis. It is an experience which I truly appreciate and hope to repeat at future Harlaxton Symposia.

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