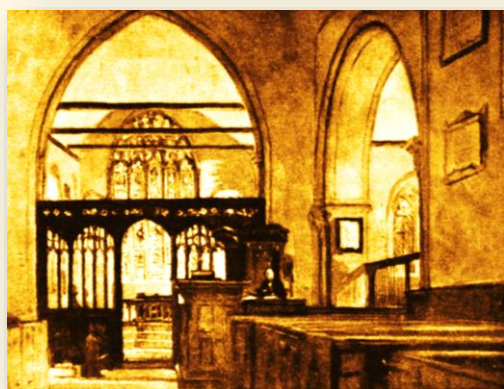


The Rood Screen



Rood screens or choir screens were partitions between the chancel and the nave, to separate the priest who celebrated Mass and the parishioners.

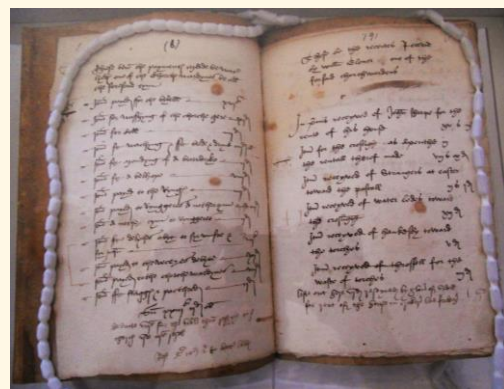
Roods became popular in the fourteenth century. They were valued fixtures in medieval parish churches and usually the side facing the nave was highly decorated. Wealthy priests and parishioners might provide bequests or give donations for roods.



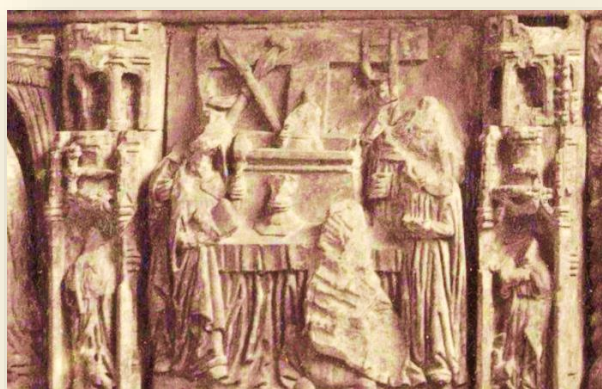
Primarily constructed from wood, rood screens were carefully carved with painted panels depicting angels, saints, and biblical figures. Rood is an Old English term meaning cross, and above the rood loft was a crucifix with images of Mary and John the Evangelist on either side.

Roods often had perches where people could place candles. In 1487 Thomas Hert bequeathed three shillings and fourpence towards candles for the rood loft at St Dunstan's (about £100 today).

It is not known which saints or other figures were shown on St Dunstan's fifteenth-century rood screen, but St Dunstan's wills from this period mention offerings to the '*rode of pyte*' (rood of pity). This may mean there was a depiction of the Man of Sorrows, as at Wellingham, Norfolk (shown above). There, the crucified Christ is shown with his wounds and surrounded by the instruments of the Passion.



St Dunstan's planned to build a new rood loft in the 1520s, which was probably similar to the one in St Stephen's church, Hackington, made at about the same time. Among those who contributed to the St Dunstan's rood loft was John Roo, the vicar at St Stephen's, who gave £7 in 1522 (around £3,500 today) and William Burges, a chantry priest at the Roper chantry, who bequeathed 6s 8d in 1530. Completed in about 1531, according to the churchwardens' accounts, the work was done by Robert Beleme, and the old one was bought by Richard Wodde.



During the Reformation, the authorities ordered the destruction of roods, images, and altars. The speed and thoroughness of their removal varied because some parishes were reluctant to destroy these treasured fixtures. Some roods did survive, with the earliest dating back to the thirteenth century. This 1513 carved altarpiece in Exeter Cathedral has been mutilated but still depicts St Gregory kneeling before the altar with the instruments of the Passion, where he experienced a vision of Christ.

Our thanks to Canterbury Historical and Archaeological Society (CHAS) for their generous sponsorship of this postgraduate student project. Credits: Research and text by Beth Woljung. Photograph of Rood screen detail of Man of Sorrows from St Andrew's, Wellingham, courtesy of Simon Knott, norfolkchurches.co.uk; St Dunstan Churchwardens' Accounts, CCAL: U3-141/5/2, photograph courtesy of Dr Sheila Sweetinburgh; Detail from watercolour print by Aaron E. Penley of St Stephen's, Hackington, showing the rood screen in 1857; 1851 photograph of a stone reredos, with scene of St Gregory praying at Man of Sorrows altar, Chapel of St Boniface and St Saviour, Exeter Cathedral built 1513, courtesy of Rijksmuseum <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/nl/collectie/RP-F-F04626>.