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Virtual St Stephen's: The Medieval Model and the Art Historian

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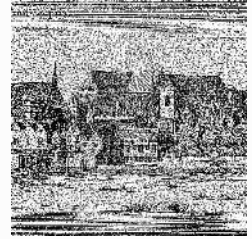
New Approaches to St Stephen's Chapel, Palace of Westminster

One Object by **Tim Ayers**One Object and **John Cooper**

WORD COUNT:1,405

Back in 2011, a meeting between an art historian and a historian at the University of York led to the investigation from two disciplinary angles of one of the great lost buildings of England, St Stephen's Chapel in the Palace of Westminster. At the heart of royal government, the medieval chapel was the most important place of worship in the palace, and a central site for the liturgical and visual commemoration of the Plantagenet kings. It has often been regarded as a key building for the development of English medieval architecture.[1] The sculpture, painted decoration, and glazing were also magnificent; by good fortune, they are very well documented in the surviving fabric rolls for the building. The rolls record that the chapel was rebuilt from 1292, at the command of Edward I, and completed some sixty years later, under his grandson Edward III. The medieval building has been discussed often by historians of British art and architecture, but the last monograph appeared as long ago as 1955.[2] St Stephen's and its college therefore promised rich rewards for researchers into medieval kingship, the king's works, the art and architecture of the building, and the crafts employed at this major site.

In an extraordinary transformation, from the mid-sixteenth century, St Stephen's Chapel became the first permanent meeting place for the House of Commons (fig. 1).[3] This was the physical setting for the development of representative government in early modern Britain, through three centuries of debates and legislation, before it was swept away by fire in 1834. The current House of Commons owes much to it, both in layout and parliamentary practice.[4] There was also a suggestion, which was lent authority by the "Living Heritage" pages of the UK Parliament website, that the liturgical layout of the preceding medieval building had shaped the Commons chamber and its operations.[5] We therefore planned a study of the lost building, looking at the relationship between liturgical and political spaces across a long period—a collaborative initiative that would open up the building both to scholars and the general public, throwing new light on Parliament in Britain. Our conversation led to the major AHRC-funded research project "St Stephen's Chapel, Westminster: Visual and Political Culture, 1292–1941" (2013–2017), and a separate project for the publication of the fabric accounts for the medieval building and college. Central to our work was the visualisation of the medieval and early modern building, which we called "Virtual St Stephen's".[6] A subsequent AHRC-funded project "Listening to the Commons" (2018–2019) explored the acoustics of the pre-1834 chamber and the experience of debates in the House of Commons, especially as they may have been heard by women.[7] A critical edition of the accounts, a major book on St Stephen's College, and numerous articles have already appeared; a monograph on St Stephen's across this time-span is in preparation.[8] Further work on St Stephen's cloister, and other buildings formerly belonging to the medieval college, is ongoing.

Figure 1

Wenceslaus Hollar, *Ciuitatis Westmonasteriensis pars*, 1647, etching, 15.2 × 28.6 cm. The 'Parliament House' is on the left. Parliamentary Art Collection (WOA 845). Digital image courtesy of Palace of Westminster (all rights reserved).

The three papers presented here are the fruit of the application of new technologies to an understanding of St Stephen's. The first two are a pair, about the virtual models that we made of the chapel and the House of Commons. Virtual modelling is part of the fast-moving field of digital art history.[9] Architectural historians have used such models to explore the spatial character of buildings and their environments, in the present and the past, and towards the telling of new stories about them, using the diverse potentials of the medium.[10] Some have focused upon lost monuments, such as the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 (from 1997).[11] By contrast, "Visualizing Venice" has set out to understand the city, its territories and lagoon, and how they changed through time (begun 2009).[12] For an exhibition at the National Gallery in London, the lost church of San Pier Maggiore in Florence was modelled, as the original context for display of paintings in their collection (2015–2016), reintegrating scattered parts to imagine lost wholes.[13] Our project also made use of the particular qualities that visualisation offers, to imagine and explore a lost building, an interior space that changed through time, and the reintegration of parts. We worked with the Centre for the Study of Christianity & Culture at the University of York, which is experienced in the making of such virtual models.[14]

The first piece, "Virtual St Stephen's: The Medieval Model and the Art Historian", is a discussion of the model of the medieval chapel from the perspective of an art historian, about the research that brought what had been lost into being. The second article, "Mapping the Unknown: Using Incomplete Evidence to Craft Digital Three-Dimensional Models of St Stephen's" is a reflection upon the processes of the modeller, with a discussion of how the model of the House of Commons was created technically. They consider the value of such visualisations both for research purposes within the project and for the communication of our findings about this building to the general public. For all visualisations of a scholarly kind, it is necessary to record the processes involved in creating them, as the models themselves do not document their own making and technologies change. These two essays are also therefore a way of putting our project on record. The authors explain how decisions were made, so that the models can be part of continuing conversations.[15] It is likely that the medieval chapel, for example, will continue to be central to debates about royal patronage of art and architecture in late medieval England, the transmission of artistic ideas, the coordination of crafts in such projects, and the effects of the Black Death upon art. In throwing light upon how the interiors of these building were created

originally and received, we aim to give the visualisations a continuing value, for researchers and for pedagogical purposes.[16]

During the course of the project, further exciting opportunities grew out of encounters with specialists in other fields of research.[17] The third article here, "The Wall Paintings at St Stephen's Chapel, Westminster Palace", records the results of new analyses that were carried out on paintings that survive from the medieval chapel. Kept today in the British Museum, the paintings were discovered and removed when the architect James Wyatt undertook to install new seats for Irish MPs in the House of Commons, after the Acts of Union in 1800–1801. Both iconographically and technically, the paintings are of outstanding interest, as many have recognised.[18] They include lively narrative scenes from the stories of the Old Testament figures Job and Tobit, with inscriptions, but also brightly painted fragments of masonry. Together, they are important material evidence for what the highly decorated interior of St Stephen's once looked like. Indeed, it was part of the visualisation process to put these paintings back into the building from which they had been removed. The paintings can also be cross-referenced to documentary evidence for the painting, gilding, and decoration of the chapel in the 1350s; the fabric rolls set out the materials that were bought and their costs, and a wealth of evidence for the painting processes.

Taking up an invitation from curators Lloyd de Beer and Naomi Speakman, project researchers made their way in May 2014 to look at the paintings in the museum, along with interested parties from the National Gallery, and many others. We inspected a group of panels in store, and the best preserved pieces, now on display in the main galleries. These paintings had been subjected to analysis in the 1970s, when some preliminary discoveries were made but the potential of such analysis has increased vastly.[19] Thanks to the interest and generosity of staff at the British Museum (Lloyd de Beer and David Saunders), and at the National Gallery in London (Helen Howard and Catherine Higgitt), it was agreed to carry out new analyses in 2015–2016. These looked especially at underdrawings (infra-red reflectography), the very expensive red lake pigment (high-performance liquid chromatography), and original finishes. The flexibility of the journal's online format has allowed us usefully to include a large number of the resulting images at a high resolution, often within a slider tool for comparison. The exciting findings of this research team are published here for the first time, revealing much about the sophisticated painting techniques and lavish materials employed in a project at the very highest level of royal patronage in fourteenth-century England. They also suggest that there is much more to be discovered."

About the authors

Dr John Cooper researches and teaches sixteenth-century history at the University of York. A graduate of Merton College Oxford, he was a Thouron Fellow at the University of Pennsylvania before returning to Oxford for his doctorate investigating Tudor royal propaganda. In 2013–2019, John was Principal Investigator of the AHRC projects: 'St Stephen's Chapel, Westminster: Visual and Political Culture, 1292–1941'; and 'Listening to the Commons: The Sounds of Debate and the Experience of Women in Parliament *c*.1800', funded at York in partnership with Parliament. Some results from these projects appeared as *Space and Sound in the British Parliament: Architecture, Access and Acoustics* (Wiley, 2019). He is currently working on a collaborative project with Historic Royal Palaces focusing on Henry VIII's progresses. John is a Fellow and Trustee of the Society of Antiquaries

of London, and a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society. He lives in North Yorkshire.

Tim Ayers is Professor of the History of Art at the University of York. His research interests include high and late medieval English art and architecture, monumental art and its relationship to architecture (especially stained glass), the international trade in window glass, word and image relations in monumental contexts, art and architecture and the medieval university. Recent publications include *The Medieval Stained Glass of Merton College, Oxford* (2013) and a critical edition of the *Fabric Accounts of St Stephen's Chapel, Westminster* (2020).

Footnotes

1. Christopher Wilson, *The Gothic Cathedral, The Architecture of the Great Church, 1130–1530* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1990), 192–196, 204–206.

2. Maurice Hastings, *St Stephen's Chapel and its Place in the Development of Perpendicular Style in England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955). For subsequent discussion, in print, see John H. Harvey, "The Origin of the Perpendicular Style", in Edward Martyn Jope (ed.), *Studies in Building History: Essays in Recognition of the Work of B.H. St. J. O'Neil* (London: Odhams, 1961): 134–165; R. Allen Brown, Howard M. Colvin and Arnold J. Taylor, *The History of the King's Works*, Vol. I, *The Middle Ages* (London: HMSO, 1963), 510–525; Wilson, *The Gothic Cathedral*, 192–196, 204–206; Paul Binski, *Westminster Abbey and the Plantagenets: Kingship and the Representation of Power, 1200–1400* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 175–185; Paul Binski, *Gothic Wonder: Art, Artifice and the Decorated Style, 1290–1350* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 122–123; John Goodall, "St Stephen's Chapel, Westminster", in Warwick Rodwell and Tim Tatton-Brown (eds), *Westminster, The Art, Architecture and Archaeology of the Royal Abbey and Palace*, British Archaeological Association Conference Transactions, 39 (for 2013), 2 parts (2015), Part II, 111–119.

3. J.P.D. Cooper, "The Elizabethan House of Commons and St Stephen's Chapel Westminster", *Parliamentary History* 38, no. 1 (2019): 34–59.

4. J.P.D. Cooper and Richard A. Gaunt, "Architecture and Politics in the Palace of Westminster, 1399 to the Present", *Parliamentary History* 38, no. 1 (2019): 1–16.

5. Hastings, *St Stephen's Chapel*, 106. The relevant "Living Heritage" pages were subsequently rewritten by the St Stephen's project team; see https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/building/palace/ststephenschapel (accessed 18 June 2020).

6. See https://www.virtualststephens.org.uk (accessed 18 June 2020).

7. Catriona Cooper, "The Sound of Debate in Georgian England: Auralising the House of Commons", *Parliamentary History* 38, no. 1 (2019): 60–73.

8. Tim Ayers (ed.) and Maureen Jurkowski (transcriber and translator), *The Fabric Accounts of St Stephen's Chapel, Westminster, 1292–1396* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2020); and Elizabeth Biggs, *Westminster—a Royal Chapel and English Kingship, 1348–1548* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2020). The articles include: Rosemary Hill, "'Proceeding like Guy Faux': The Antiquarian Investigation of St Stephen's Chapel Westminster, 1790–1837", *Architectural History* 59 (2016): 253–279; a special issue of *Parliamentary History* (2019); and J.P.D. Cooper and James Jago, "The Great Seal of the Commonwealth and the House of Commons" (in preparation).

9. For a recent survey, see Kathryn Brown (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Digital Humanities and Art History* (London: Routledge, 2020).

10. Caroline Bruzelius, "Digital Technologies and New Evidence in Architectural History", *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 76, no. 4 (December 2017): 436–439. For the potentials, see Elaine Sullivan, Angel David Nieves, and Lisa M. Snyder, "Making the Model: Scholarship and Rhetoric in 3-D Historical Reconstructions", in Jentery Sayers (ed.), *Making Things and Drawing Boundaries: Experiments in the Digital Humanities* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 301–316. Virtual models have been distinguished from "reality-based" models. For a discussion of these, see Amy Jeffs, "Digital 3D Modeling for the History of Art", in Kathryn Brown (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Digital Humanities and Art History* (London: Routledge, 2020), 313-325.
11. Lisa M. Snyder, "Research, Process, Publication, and Pedagogy, Reconstructing the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893", in Kathryn Brown (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Digital Humanities and Art History* (London: Routledge, 2020), 459–478.
12. See http://www.visualizingvenice.org (accessed 18 June 2020). It is one of many collaborative projects at *Wired!*, the Lab for Digital Art History & Visual Culture at Duke University, at: http://dukewired.org (accessed 18 June 2020).
13. See National Gallery, https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/exhibitions/past/visions-of-paradise-botticinis-palmieri-altarpiece (accessed 18 June 2020).
14. See https://www.christianityandculture.org.uk/research (accessed 18 June 2020).
15. For the decision-making process, see Sullivan, Nieves, and Snyder, "Making the Model: Scholarship and Rhetoric in 3-D Historical Reconstructions", 301–316.
16. For the pedagogical uses of virtual models and modelling, see Snyder, "Research, Process, Publication, and Pedagogy", 473; and Caroline Bruzelius, "Teaching with Visualization Technologies: How Does Information Become Knowledge", *Material Religion* 9 (2013): 246–253.
17. This also included staff at the Museum of London Archaeology Unit, which houses human bones that were excavated from the undercroft of St Stephen's Chapel in 1992. In response to the project, these bones have been analysed at the University of Bradford Stable Isotope Laboratory, leading to discoveries about the origins, diet, and life histories of those buried there: Julia Beaumont, Jelena Bekvalac, Sam Harris, and Cathy Batt, "Identifying cohorts using isotope mass spectrometry: the potential of temporal resolution and dietary profiles", *Archaeometry*, forthcoming.
18. Ernest William Tristram, *English Wall Painting of the Fourteenth Century* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1955), 48–58, 206–219; and Binski, *Westminster Abbey and the Plantagenets*, 183–185.
19. Peter C. van Geersdaele and Lesley J. Goldsworthy, "The Restoration of Wall Painting Fragments from St Stephen's Chapel, Westminster", *The Conservator* 2 (1978): 9–12.

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