



*St Stephen's College, Westminster:  
A Royal Chapel and English  
Kingship, 1348-1548*

**Elizabeth Biggs**

Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2020

**Review by: Samuel Lane**



*St Stephen's College, Westminster: A Royal Chapel and English Kingship, 1348–1548*. By Elizabeth Biggs. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2020. ISBN 978-1-78327-465-6. xi + 248 pp. £60.

**S**t Stephen's College was founded by Edward III in 1348 and dissolved in 1548 by Edward VI. In the intervening two centuries, its twenty-six priests—supported by a variety of staff including choristers and singing men—served the chapels within the royal Palace of Westminster, namely those of St Stephen, St Mary Undercroft, and the oratory of St Mary le Pew. While the College is mentioned not infrequently in modern scholarship, it has, as Biggs observes, “neither been studied in its own right nor as a complete institution” (3). This is particularly regrettable, for the College received a remarkable degree of attention from monarchs over the course of the later Middle Ages. Biggs' study, stemming from her 2016 University of York PhD thesis, and with its origins in the AHRC-funded project *St Stephen's Chapel: Visual and Political Culture, 1292–1941*, sets out to remedy this lacuna, and examine the College “as a key institution within the most important English palace,” exploring “its buildings, its personnel and its relationship with every king between 1348 and 1548” (xi).

Biggs' monograph is divided into five overlapping chapters, framed by an introduction and conclusion. The first chapter discusses the College's early years, exploring its foundation, its functions and purpose, the nature of its endowment, and its disputes with Westminster Abbey. The second covers the College during the reign of Richard II, including the King's own engagement with the College and the litigation over the lands granted to St Stephen's under Edward III's will. The third examines the College during the fifteenth century from 1399 to 1485, charting how successive kings sought to use the College, and how the canons responded to the political and economic challenges of the period. The fourth chapter considers the College between 1471 and 1536, covering the College's liturgical and musical life and its new cloister, as well as how its canons interacted with the king, his household, and visitors to Westminster. The final chapter evaluates the College's relationship with the Reformation, which culminated in its dissolution in 1548 under the Second Chantries Act. Together, these chapters transform our understanding of St Stephen's, providing a full and rich portrait of an institution that has received only limited historiographical attention to date.

The book is admirably researched. Despite the unfortunate loss of the majority of the College's own libraries and archives, probably due to being discarded after its dissolution, much material survives concerning the institution. Biggs has therefore consulted material from no fewer than sixteen repositories, making particular use of documents held by the National Archives, the British Library, and Westminster Abbey. She has also mastered a considerable volume of secondary literature, including works published shortly before her own book's publication, such as Jennifer Caddick's stimulating 2019 article on the Painted Chamber and the openings of parliament. The breadth of scholarship upon which Biggs draws is deeply impressive; while she principally uses the work of other political and ecclesiastical historians, she also engages with the work of archaeologists, musicologists, and historians of art and architecture. This enables her not only to cover a

broad range of subjects, from the erection of a new porch and cloister in Richard II's reign, to the music sung at St Stephen's, but also to write with great insight and detail, as when discussing the College's disputes with Westminster Abbey.

Another major strength of Biggs' book is how she locates the College in its wider context. She repeatedly compares St Stephen's to other colleges in England. For example, she compares its endowment to that of New College, Oxford; its receipt of alien priory lands to that by St George's College, Windsor; and its musical provision to that of Manchester College and Higham Ferrers College. Yet Biggs is also aware of institutions with a collegiate structure on the continent, which may have served as an inspiration for St Stephen's, including the Sainte-Chapelle in Paris and Charlemagne's foundation of St Mary's at Aachen. Moreover, Biggs is constantly mindful of the evolving political landscape, for instance considering how disputes over lands granted to St Stephen's reflected "a particularly intractable problem of exercising kingship in the early years of Richard II's reign: that of balancing political factions without a strong mediating force during the king's minority" (74). In consequence, Biggs is able not simply to study a single college, but also to contemplate broader issues, such as royal piety, the health of the medieval Church, and the course of the Reformation.

Yet these are by no means the only impressive qualities of Biggs' book. For the most part, it is accessibly and elegantly written, as when she notes how the College "co-operated, co-existed, and quarrelled with Westminster Abbey" (8). Biggs also appears to have no difficulty crossing the "medieval-early modern divide"; she seems equally at home discussing both the visitation of the College by Adam Houghton, Bishop of St Davids, in 1377, and the royal council's order for the image of our Lady of Pity to be removed from St Mary le Pew in 1545. Furthermore, on a practical level, the book is attractively produced; the map of Westminster Palace and its surroundings is useful; and the six images, mostly of the St Stephen's early sixteenth century cloister, are clear and well-integrated into the text.

However, the work does suffer from slight weaknesses. Firstly, one might protest that Biggs spends a little too much time exploring ideas that are already familiar to her likely readers. This is especially the case in the introductory section entitled "Models of Kingship," where we are reminded that "the king was central to the late medieval English political system," and that "counsel was the mechanism by which the king could be influenced, but the work of government was in theory directed by the king's own wishes" (11). Secondly, the book includes a few small factual errors; for instance, Biggs asserts that Richard Medford (or Mitford) attained the bishopric of Chichester in 1388, whereas he was actually only provided to the see in 1389 (95). Thirdly, a handful of Biggs' assertions are not fully convincing. By way of example, whether it remains the case that the "conventional reading" of the 1441 trial of Eleanor Cobham "is still that of the Tudor historians, who saw it as ... a first political assault on Eleanor's husband, Humphrey, duke of Gloucester" is at least open to question (125), particularly following the work of Lucy Rhymer in her 2010 doctoral thesis, "The Political Career of Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, c.1413-1447." Finally, there are a number of minor typographical mistakes. These are most obvious in the

footnotes and bibliography, as when the dates of Henry Chichele's archiepiscopate are given as "14141443", rather than "1414-1443" (224).

Notwithstanding these caveats, Biggs' book remains an excellent work of scholarship. It sheds much light on an important but hitherto neglected institution, and will therefore be of interest to scholars of government, politics, and the Church in later medieval and early sixteenth-century England.

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