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### Book Review: Elizabeth Biggs, *St Stephen's College, Westminster: A Royal Chapel and English Kingship, 1348-1548*

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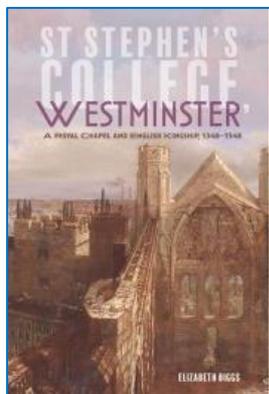
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# PEREGRINATIONS

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**Review of Elizabeth Biggs, *St Stephen's College, Westminster: A Royal Chapel and English Kingship, 1348-1548*. Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2020.**  
262 Pages, 23.4 x 15.6 cm, 6 b/w. 1 line. Illustrations 9781783274956

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The loss, in the fire of 1834, of much of the structure of the chapel of St Stephen's College, Westminster is, surprisingly for a royal foundation, mirrored by a dearth of the kind of documentation usually associated with a college – its statutes, charters, inventories, cartulary and so on. In the case of St Stephen's these documents were not, as might have been anticipated, transferred to the Court of Augmentations at the time of the college's dissolution.

This provides significant challenges to any historian wishing to explore the two centuries of the college's existence, but it also provides an opportunity to examine a collegiate institution from different perspectives – and this Elizabeth Biggs does with admirable precision, drawing upon a wide range of disparate sources to tackle the story of the college obliquely rather than head on.

What results is a study that differs from most explorations of colleges in the later middle ages with their tendency to rely on the statutes and cartularies to steer attention to the assets and rituals of the college. Such can be seen in the antiquarian examinations of, for example, E.K. Bennet into Rushworth College or the output of Alexander Hamilton Thompson and indeed in more recent research of Edington, by Janet Stevenson, or St Mary's, Warwick, by Charles Fonge. The lack of similar evidence for St Stephen's necessitates a refreshingly different approach.

The structure for the enterprise is essentially chronological. Chapter 1 covers the college's foundation and its early days in the reign of Edward III, reflecting on the college's ability to convey its founder's want for display and piety, along with its confrontation with Westminster Abbey. Chapter 2, matching the reign of Richard II, focuses on the college securing its financial position and its place within the Palace of Westminster. By contrast, Chapter 3 ranges over the eighty years of the Wars of the Roses though the extant documentation means that its emphasis is on canon appointments and funding. The available material, primarily



**Figure 1** Model of reconstructed interior of St Stephen's Chapel, Westminster, rood screen, looking towards the choir, 1360s. Photo: Copyright images reproduced by permission of the 'St Stephen's Chapel Westminster' project,

the Black Book of the Household from 1471, also dictates the focus of Chapter 4 on the various relationships between the palace and the college. The concluding chapter explores the impact of the protracted trials and tribulations of the Reformation on the college and the route to its eventual dissolution.

Whilst the comparative lack of direct documentation forces a different approach to the subject it is those occasions where documentation from other sources is readily available that the account really comes to life. Thus, the most incisive and illuminating sections of the book include the wonderful recounting of the dispute between the college and Westminster Abbey over their respective powers and spheres of influence, derived primarily from the abbey's records. The stand-off between the parties lasted nearly two decades, from 1375 to 1394, and was overseen by three popes and two kings. At one stage the college was temporarily excommunicated. Much of the considerable energy expended seems to have focussed on determining which court, papal or royal, had jurisdiction over the matters in dispute.

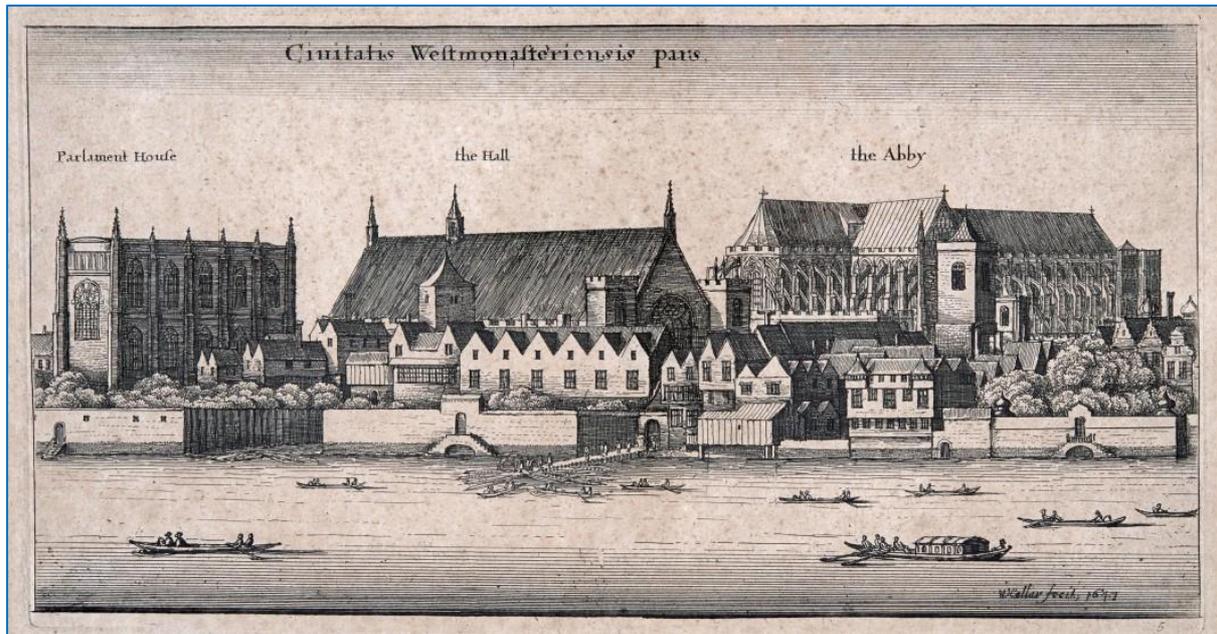
Similarly, the impact of the Reformation on the workings of the college are perceptively handled. The account provides substantial evidence in support of treating the protracted closure of colleges as a matter in its own right and resisting any temptation to simply lump that outcome together with the dissolution of the



**Figure 2** Model of reconstructed interior of St Stephen's Chapel, Westminster, south-east corner of the chancel, 1360s. Photo: Copyright images reproduced by permission of the 'St Stephen's Chapel Westminster' project, University of York, UK.

monasteries. How St Stephen's negotiated the final decades of its existence reflects the considerable ambiguities of the period. There was a wide range of opinions amongst the college's canons, reflecting the wider lack of consensus on what form the ecclesiastical reforms should take. Yet this was a matter of debate rather than dogmatic assertion. These ambiguities took physical form as well. The cult image of the Lady of Piety was removed in 1545, yet obits and chantry masses were still being performed as late as 1548. Despite Westminster no longer being used as a royal palace from the 1520s considerable expense and energy was entailed in building a new cloister for the college.

On a smaller scale, there are important challenges to received wisdom, whether on the normally assumed simultaneous foundation of St Stephen's and St George's, Windsor or the dating of the new cloister in the time of Henry VIII. The



**Figure 3** Wenceslaus Hollar, *Ciuitatis Westmonasteriensis pars*, 1647, etching, 15.2 x 28.6 cm. The “Parliament House” (the former chapel of St Stephen’s College) is on the left. There are some issues with the veracity of this image. Parliamentary Art Collection (WOA 845). Digital image courtesy of Palace of Westminster (All rights reserved).

trial, in 1441, of Eleanor, wife of the Duke of Gloucester, on a charge of treasonable necromancy is viewed from a new perspective with the college chapel, as the venue of the trial, providing a location where both bishops and lay privy councillors could preside and thus a politically visible space capable of mediating between church and state.

Although the structure is predominantly chronological, a common theme running throughout is the particular influence of the college’s prime location within the Palace of Westminster. This ensured continued interest from patrons, a benefit not always bestowed on colleges following the death of the founder. The relationship between the college, which boasted four clerks and six choristers to provide a very early emphasis on the use of polyphony in worship, and the Chapel Royal is well explored. As is the use of the college chapel as a vehicle of display and visual magnificence. Music and visual enrichment combine in St Stephen’s to reinforce Clive Burgess’ concept of college institutions presenting opportunities not just for a purgatorial emphasis on masses for the patrons past and present but for the role of colleges in increasing the total volume of worship emanating from the kingdom. More problematic is Biggs’ weaving into the narrative the common theme of ‘kingship’ and how it might have been expressed through the college. This approach is somewhat hampered by a certain fuzziness in the definition of kingship and the seeming lack of definitive changes in college life. Even during the Wars of the Roses, a period in which six monarchs, often with widely divergent outlooks, were the patrons of the college, there were only two recorded instances of priests

being removed from the college. The history of the college provides no evidence that reflects the contrasts of the reigns of Henry VI and Edward IV, though the lack of comprehensive documentation perhaps limits what is possible.

Biggs situates St Stephen's in the wider context of European institutions citing Sainte Chapelle and St Mary's, Aachen. Closer to home, comparisons and exemplars are sparse with little use made of contemporary college foundations. Given the influence on the foundation of the college of William Edington, it is perhaps surprising to find no mention of the Bishop of Winchester's own college foundation, made just three years after that of St Stephen's. Biggs prefers, productively in a number of instances, to compare the college more with precedents of earlier royal free chapels and secular cathedrals.

Biggs stresses the importance of display to the life of the college, so it is unfortunate that the book's limited black and white illustrations do not give those readers not acquainted with the chapel any real indication of its scale and visual magnificence. The drawings of Mackenzie or Dixon would provide a degree of context.

This examination of St Stephen's gains immensely from the author's research of multiple sources, negating the disadvantages of a paucity of direct documentation. It departs from the traditional approaches to a college's story – and is all the better for it. What emerges is the unique role that St Stephen's was able to play, over two centuries, in foregrounding the liminal space between church and state; illustrated not just through the major events in the college's history such as the dispute with Westminster Abbey or its actions during the years of the English Reformation but also, on a more intimate scale, in its part in less grandiose proceedings such as the witchcraft trial of the Duchess of Gloucester. 🐼