



Langland Study Day

Worcester Cathedral

Saturday 19 September 2015

A Langland Study Day was held by Worcester Cathedral on Saturday 19 September, marking 650 years since the appearance of the first version of William Langland's epic poem known as *Piers Plowman*. Five distinguished experts addressed an enthusiastic audience of 150 people. Their biographies conclude this report.

Langland deserves to be as well known as his contemporary, Geoffrey Chaucer, for *Piers Plowman* is a substantial work, the longest version running to 8000 lines, and it gives an invaluable insight into medieval life and beliefs. Nonetheless, it is still astonishingly fresh and apposite today, confronting issues such as corruption, criminal justice, governance and marital relations. It is full of humour and humanity, moral indignation and religious insight, it inspired a clutch of other poems, it was quoted by Shakespeare, and it was called his "Bible" by the composer Elgar.

Programme

- 10.00 Session 1: **Introducing *Piers Plowman***
Dr Carl Schmidt
- 11.00 Session 2: **The Literary Context of the Poem**
Dr Lawrence Warner
- 12.00 Break
- 12.15 Session 3: **Medieval Music & Minstrelsy** (live music)
Frances Eustace
- 13.30 Buffet lunch in the Cathedral Chapter House
- 14.30 Session 4: **Medieval Monasticism**
The Right Reverend Dom Aidan Bellenger, OSB
- 15.30 Session 5: **The Life of Langland**
Peter Sutton
Followed by discussion and questions to all speakers
- 16.45 Tea/Coffee
- 17.30 Choral Evensong in the Cathedral (optional)

At the start of the Day, the Dean of Worcester Cathedral, the Very Rev. Peter Atkinson, welcomed the audience to the King's School Theatre.

The first speaker was Dr Carl Schmidt, Emeritus Fellow of Balliol College, Oxford, and editor of the new standard edition of all four versions of the original text of the poem. He began by reading the opening of the poem in Middle English, making much of the meaning clear despite the unfamiliarity of the language. He went on to speak of the literary context, mentioning works

including Layamon's *Brut*, Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, and the anonymous poems *Pearl* and *Wynnere and Wastoure*, which found echoes in *Piers Plowman*, and he discussed the likely influence of the poem on later work such as *Pierce the Ploughman's Crede*. He talked about the richness of the imagery and iconography in *Piers Plowman*, and the likely reaction of its contemporary readers to some of Langland's stylistic innovations and challenging ideas. He also examined the complex structure of the poem, which is divided into two parts, the so-called *Visio* and *Vita*, the initial Vision and the subsequent Life of the narrator, and takes the form of a series of dreams, and even dreams within dreams, a phenomenon discussed in present-day psychology. At the mid-point of the poem, he said, is a vision of well-ordered Nature contrasted with the evil in the heart of man. In every version of the poem, the poet pleads for reform of corrupt behaviour, especially in religious orders and among the powerful and the wealthy, but the emphasis on individual responsibility becomes more marked in the final version, written when Langland was nearing the end of his life. Dr Schmidt remarked that this shift in perception paralleled his own experience, to which many in the audience responded with a knowing nod.

The next speaker was Dr Lawrence Warner, Reader in Medieval English at King's College, London, and Director of the International Piers Plowman Society. He began by outlining the academic activities of the Society, which issues a *Yearbook of Langland Studies*, holds specialist conferences, and encourages members to contribute to other publications and events. He called attention to the influence on the poem of historical events such as the Black Death, war with France and the lasting legacy of the Fourth Lateran Council, which emphasised penitence. He placed the poem within the tradition of popular satire and suggested that John Ball, the religious leader of the Peasants' Revolt, was not referring to the poem, as is often thought, but to the traditional satirical figure of the honest labourer when he called on ploughmen to do his work; Langland too was drawing on Biblical and popular sources. Dr Warner also alluded to the debate over the content of the different versions of the poem, disagreeing in one instance with Dr Schmidt. He then looked at the meaning of incidents in the poem such as the humorous confessions of the Seven Deadly Sins, the scene of Piers ploughing, the need to call on Hunger to persuade idlers to work, the Harrowing of Hell, Holy Church telling the narrator that "when all treasures are tried, Truth is the best", and the conversation between the narrator and "Soul". He remarked that many of the allegorical characters given abstract names are presented as credible individuals, and that Langland's observations on merchants, marriage, poverty and charity are equally rooted in real life. He concluded by speculating that Langland was the unnamed translator from French of the much earthier romance *William of Palerne*, which tells of a werewolf and a boy who makes love to his pillow.

The morning ended with a presentation by Frances Eustace, a medieval music specialist and performer. She began by quoting Langland's description of a minstrel who is also a baker, explaining that these roles were often combined. She showed a series of pictures from contemporary manuscripts of often fantastical people and beasts playing instruments, using them to describe the role of music in all sections of society; she also discussed the role of professional minstrels,

many of whom enjoyed the conviviality of music schools during Lent, when music was silenced. To illustrate her account she sang extracts from medieval songs and played a wide range of reproduction instruments: pipe and tabor, bagpipes, shawm, harp and rebeck, an early form of fiddle made from a single hollowed-out piece of wood. The only instrument which defeated her was the "long trumpet", an eight-foot monster which she called on her colleague Alan Crumpler to play, and she drew the line at imitating the images of "musical" farting, another unlikely feature of both vulgar and court life referred to by Langland. She mentioned the difficulties of reconstructing medieval music, given the shortage of scores, some of the few survivors being the "Worcester Fragments", songs with Latin words discovered on sheets used in the bindings of books, and she concluded her very humorous session with a wooden mannequin taking the role of a dancing bear, hopping up and down at her command as she played.

Lively discussion was then heard on all sides as lunch was taken in the Cathedral Chapter House.

The Right Reverend Dom Aidan Bellenger, OSB, former parish priest of Saint Wulstan's, Malvern, and Abbot of Downside, opened the afternoon with a session on monasticism. He began by addressing the popular perception that monks take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, and contrasted this with the Benedictine Rule, where the vows are expressed in terms of stability (commitment to the religious community), conversion (constant renewal), and obedience. He pointed out that the word "monk" originally meant "solitary" and that the main function of monks has always been to pray, the day revolving around the canonical hours. Prayer is their "work", although physical labour and hospitality are also important, as is service to guests. In the Middle Ages, these included paying guests, cared for in return for donations of cash or property. Dom Aidan summarised the status of Worcester Priory, Great Malvern Priory and Little Malvern Priory in Langland's time, when the latter had no more than twelve monks and was reputedly a house to which recalcitrant brothers were sent from Worcester. It was of relevance to Langland's life story that no one was to be "clothed as a monk" before the age of fifteen, or to take final vows before the age of eighteen. It was also a misconception that schools were attached to monastic houses: grammar schools were separate, and the education offered by priories was intended for the community. Study was in fact becoming more important in the fourteenth century, when new "constitutions" led to more monks being trained in canon law in order to become priests. It was also expected that one monk in twenty should study at the university.

Peter Sutton, author of a new verse translation of the poem, was the final speaker. He discussed what can be inferred about Langland's life from the limited sources, chiefly a note on a manuscript naming the poet's father as Stacy de Rokayle, a statement in the first printed edition about his place of birth, and the poem itself, where the narrator states that he is married and lives in London, reciting psalms for wealthy patrons, and has always been in a clerical occupation. He talked about the political connections of the Rokayles and the belief that

Langland was educated at Little Malvern Priory, and gave a brief account of Malvern and London in the fourteenth century. He also pointed to evidence within the poem and in the record of a murder committed by the half-brother of the King to suggest that William had knowledge of the law and occupied a privileged position in noble households, no doubt on account of his literary prowess. He argued that William nonetheless suffered from uncertainty over his place in society because of his illegitimacy, which explained the tension in the poem between support for the stratification of society and condemnation of greed, and he concluded by offering the picture of a boy born to a Langland mother in Cleobury Mortimer, sent to school at Little Malvern under the protection of the Despenser family, the Rokayles' feudal superiors, acknowledged as a Rokayle by some members of that clan, and introduced in consequence to higher social echelons in London. He admitted that other versions of Langland's life had been proposed, and that this was but one plausible view.

Questions from the audience explored some issues further, such as the number and location of manuscript versions of the poem, how knowledge of it had been passed down, and Langland's critical attitude to lawyers. As ever, the discussion could have continued for far longer than was possible.

Peter Sutton thanked the speakers for their very informative contributions, the Cathedral for hosting the event, and the Cathedral Operational Manager and the stewards, caterers and King's School Theatre Manager for looking after everyone so well during the day. He also expressed his gratitude to the Autumn in Malvern Festival and the International Piers Plowman Society for lending their names to the event, to all those who had spread news of it, and to the audience for supporting it.

The Dean closed the formal proceedings by expressing his thanks to the speakers and the others involved. In particular, he thanked Peter Sutton for proposing the Study Day, for his significant part in organising it and in identifying the speakers, and for guiding the proceedings. He then invited all present to attend Choral Evensong in the Cathedral.

Dr A.V.C. Schmidt

Dr Schmidt taught at University College, Dublin, and Exeter College, Oxford, before becoming Andrew Bradley-James Maxwell Fellow and Senior English Tutor at Balliol College, Oxford, in 1973, where he is now an Emeritus Fellow. He was co-editor of *Medium Ævum* from 1981 to 1990, and his many articles and books on medieval literature include a study of Langland's poetic art, *The Clerkly Maker* (Brewer, 1987), and the Everyman edition of *The Vision of Piers Plowman* (2nd edition 1995). His prose translation of the poem has appeared in the World's Classics series (Oxford University Press, 1992), and his collected essays on *Piers Plowman* are published under the title *Earthly Honest Things* (Cambridge Scholars, 2012). However, his greatest contribution to Langland scholarship is his comprehensive four-text edition of *Piers Plowman* (Medieval Institute, Western Michigan University, 2 vols, 2008), which is the fruit of a lifetime's research and completes Skeat's pioneering work on the text in the nineteenth century. Dr

Schmidt has also made a major contribution to the study of Chaucer and the medieval English contemplatives.

Dr Lawrence Warner

Dr Warner was educated at Yale and the University of Pennsylvania, and moved to Australia in 2000, where he was in turn Executive Director of the Australian Academy of the Humanities, Lecturer in English at the University of Adelaide, and Senior Lecturer in Middle English at the University of Sydney. He was co-editor of *The Yearbook of Langland Studies* from 2004 to 2012, before moving to King's College London in 2013, where he is now Senior Lecturer in Medieval English. He has published essays on Dante, Geoffrey of Monmouth, Chaucer, Shakespeare and manuscript studies, on a 12th century Hebrew autobiography by a convert to Judaism, and especially on Langland. His books on Langland are: *The Lost History of 'Piers Plowman': The Earliest Transmission of Langland's Work* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), and *The Myth of 'Piers Plowman': Constructing a Medieval Literary Archive* (Cambridge University Press, 2014). He is Director of the International Piers Plowman Society.

Frances Eustace

After studying music at Surrey University and the Geneva Conservatoire, and working as a freelance orchestral player and recitalist, Frances Eustace fell in love with 'original instruments' when her friend and colleague, Jeremy Ward, lent her his baroque bassoon. Since 1983 she has performed with all the leading orchestras in London and many in Germany, Belgium and Holland. She has made award-winning recordings with the Taverner Players, the London Classical Players, the Gabrieli Players and the ensemble Sonnerie, and has been a member of the London Oboe Band and the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment. Her solo CD on instruments from 1600 to 1910 is regularly broadcast around the world, and she has recently added the viola da gamba, bagpipes, pipe and tabor to her repertoire. She is a member of The Border Waites and Dove's Figary, a specialist Playford Dance band playing on historical instruments. In 2009 she was awarded a MA in Medieval Studies from Bristol University and is now studying for a doctorate on 'Secular Medieval Carolling'. She is the 'loud winds tutor' for Cambridge Early Music Summer Schools, and she has worked as a dance movement therapist with young people with traumatic brain injury and with children with visual impairment and autism.

The Right Rev. Dom Aidan Bellenger, OSB

Dom Aidan has been a Benedictine monk at Downside Abbey for over thirty years. He studied at the University of Cambridge and at Angelicum University in Rome, gaining a doctorate. After teaching in schools for twenty years, he served as parish priest at St Wulstan's, Little Malvern, from 1995 to 2001. He was then appointed Prior of Downside Abbey, becoming Abbot from 2006 to 2014. He has written widely on church history, his titles including *Great Return: English Communities in Continental Europe and their Repatriation, 1793-94* (Downside Abbey, 1994), the sourcebooks *Medieval Worlds* and *Medieval Religion* (written with Roberta Anderson, Routledge 2003 and 2006), and *The Mitre and the Crown, a history of the Archbishops of Canterbury* (with Stella Fletcher, History Press, 2013). He has written histories of Downside and St Wulstan's, has lectured at the

Universities of Bristol, Bath Spa, Birmingham, Worcester, and the Open University, and is a Visiting Scholar at Sarum College and a Fellow of several learned societies.

Peter Sutton

Peter Sutton studied languages at Cambridge University and spent fifteen years in adult education before becoming Research Specialist and Head of Publications at the Unesco Institute for Education in Hamburg, where he edited the *International Review of Education*. In 1994 he returned to the UK and became a freelance translator and editor for cultural institutions, lawyers and international organisations. At the same time he trained as a professional actor and started writing plays. *Elgar and Alice* toured during the composer's anniversary celebrations in 2007 and was revived in 2011 at the Swan Theatre, Worcester, where *The Prebumpious Mr Punch* was premiered in 2013. He wrote a presentation on William Langland for the 2012 Autumn in Malvern Festival, and his modern verse translation of *Piers Plowman* has recently been published (McFarland, 2014). He has written textbooks and articles on languages and education and has been a visiting lecturer on translation, English language and education at universities in Armenia, Germany, Russia and the UK.