

St Mary, Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk

St Mary has one of the finest of all angel roofs; its eleven pairs of angels, facing one another across the nave, are arrayed as if in procession towards the altar.

One of the largest parish churches in England, St Mary was largely rebuilt in the fifteenth century, funded by donations from wealthy locals. The angel roof was endowed by John Baret, a wealthy and well-connected Bury cloth merchant. Baret died in 1467, leaving a fabulously detailed will, in which he referred to “all the work of the angels on loft which I have do made for a remembrance of me and my friends”. The roof angels nearest the altar (repainted in the nineteenth century) bear his motto, “Grace Me Govern”.

John Baret’s cadaver tomb can be seen on the south side of the church. The main sculpture shows him as a withered corpse, while in a small panel on the front, he appears alive and finely robed, touchingly carrying the central word of his motto, “Me” (see photograph on p. xii).

In addition to his wealth and local influence, Baret was awarded a silver collar of SS by Henry VI, a badge of preferment granted for personal service to the Lancastrian regime. He married well, but not apparently happily; his wife, Elizabeth Drury, whose family were also rich clothiers, is accorded only one short sentence in his forty-page will. The marriage was childless, and the couple would seem by the time of the will to have lived apart.

This is one of the finest of all angel roofs. Hammer beams alternate with arch braces; the hammer beams are carved as recumbent angels, set in pairs, eleven on each side of the nave.

The angels seem to form a procession, vested for High Mass. Starting from the east end, nearest the altar, they run as follows: 1) the painted angels of the ceiling; 2) incense bearers, carrying incense boats and spoons; 3) thurifers, carrying censers; 4) taperers, carrying spiked candlesticks; 5) sub-deacons, bearing bibles; 6) chalice bearers; 7) clergy, wearing chasubles; 8) choirmasters, their hands raised as if conducting; 9) archangels, clad

in suits of feathers; 10) young women, bearing crowns; 11) and finally, at the west end, crowned kings holding sceptres, one bearing a heart, the other a book.

Writing in the 1960s, J.B.L. Tolhurst plausibly suggested that the king angels represent Henry VI (there is some similarity between the figures here and portraits of the king), and that the young women, bearing but not wearing crowns, depict Margaret of Anjou, who was betrothed to Henry in 1444, married him in April 1445 and was then crowned queen consort in May of the same year. Tolhurst therefore believes that the angel roof was commissioned during the period between the betrothal and Margaret’s coronation (1444-5) and that this is why the female figures carry, but do not yet wear, the crown.

Henry VI’s marriage to Margaret of Anjou was brokered by William de la Pole, Earl, then Marquis and, finally, Duke of Suffolk. By the 1440s, de la Pole was the *eminence grise* behind the king, who was ill-suited to rule and suffered from periodic bouts of mental illness. The marriage of Henry and Margaret was a key part of William de la Pole’s (ultimately unsuccessful) strategy to reach peace with the French, and so cling on to what little remained of Henry V’s conquests in France.

In my view, the figures in the roof intentionally carry a double connotation. On one level, they depict the enthronement of the Blessed Virgin as Queen of Heaven (this is, after all, the Church of St Mary, and Baret’s will shows his especial devotion to the Virgin), but they can also be read as an expression of Baret’s support for William de la Pole’s foreign policy and his political faction. De la Pole had a strong regional power base in Suffolk, and it seems very likely that he, rather than the ineffectual king, was behind the decision to award Baret his silver collar of SS for services rendered.





*A view along the nave roof at St Mary, showing the alternating
angel hammer beams and arch braces.*

The three angels shown are a chalice bearer, a celebrant and a choirmaster,
his hands raised as if conducting.



An angel "taperer" at St Mary carries a spiked candlestick, and in his right hand a small box, perhaps meant to contain a flint and steel for lighting candles.



A close-up of one of the hammer beam angels at St Mary, dressed as a celebrant of the Mass, his hands joined in prayer.

The wing on the right of the photograph bears a chalked graffito left by a workman from the restoration of the early 1960s: “K.W.J. Cornish, Perry Road, 1963”.

The carving is of exceptional quality and is probably the work of craftsmen attached to Bury Abbey. John Baret had strong connections to the Abbey, which was itself a major economic power in

the region, and would seem to have acted as a lay adviser to the abbot. The faces of the twenty-two angels in the roof are all strikingly real, and may be portraits of actual people, particularly since in his will Baret refers to the angels as “a remembrance of me and my friends”. Amongst the angel figures are one with a slight squint, and another with a double chin.



A female angel figure bears a crown.

Following J.B.L. Tolhurst's theory, Mortlock (in his *Guide to Suffolk Churches*) writes that she "could well represent Margaret of Anjou, betrothed to Henry VI in 1444 and crowned in May 1445" and adds, "it is tempting to suppose that the roof was finished in time for Henry to see it when he held his parliament in the [Bury] abbey refectory in February 1447."

The Bury Parliament of 1447 was momentous in the power politics of the time. On his arrival in

the town, Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, brother of the late King Henry V and the leading opponent of William de la Pole's policy of brokering a peace with the French, was placed under house arrest and died of a stroke. With Gloucester dead, de la Pole enjoyed untrammelled influence over Henry VI, until the failure of his policy in France led to de la Pole's own impeachment, exile and murder in 1450.



An archangel from the south side of the nave roof at St Mary.

He is clad in a suit of feathers, like an actor in a medieval pageant or mystery play, and bears a wand and scroll.



One of the pair of “king” angels from the west end of the roof at St Mary.

As throughout the roof, this is carving of breathtaking quality, probably executed by craftsmen attached to Bury Abbey; John Baret was, we know, a confidant of the Abbot. As discussed in “Heaven in the Rafters”, the roof may well carry a double connotation, both symbolising the coronation of Mary as Queen of Heaven (in which case the crown bearing female figure is the

Virgin, and the king figure Christ) and signalling Baret’s political alignment with William de la Pole. On this reading, the female figure is Margaret of Anjou, and the “king” angel Henry VI. Margaret’s betrothal and marriage to Henry was brokered by de la Pole with the aim of reaching peace with the French and safeguarding England’s few remaining possessions in France. Ultimately, it failed.