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## **A Medieval Pyx?**

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## Notes

### A MEDIEVAL PYX?

After the death of Dr. Basil Cottle (1917–94), sometime reader in medieval studies in the University of Bristol, his papers were sorted by Dr. M.J. Crossley Evans. Amongst them were a number of albums of postcards and photographs previously belonging to Canon R.T. Cole (1874–1948), rector of Christ Church with St. Ewen, Bristol, from 1903 to 1938. Their contents include a series of photographs of details of some Bristol churches taken by a local photographer, Fred Little the younger, who was in business at 16 Castle Mill Street until 1940. An unmounted photograph in the collection shows what is described as an ‘ancient host box in St. Peter’s church, Bristol’ (Fig. 1). This is of great interest because, although the existence of the box had been noted by antiquarians, it was destroyed when St. Peter’s was blitzed during the Second World War and it was thought that no photograph had been taken. Certainly none has been published.

On the back of the photograph is a description of the box. It is not in Dr. Cottle’s writing and not in that of Canon Cole. As the description is fuller than that in any printed source it is a valuable record in itself.

Cylindrical box 6 inches high and 6 inches in diameter, turned out of a single piece of wood as is the lid, apparently beech, which has been polished and afterwards painted white. Thickness of side is  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch. The box has a band of iron round top and bottom  $\frac{3}{8}$  inch wide. [P]late with 3 key holes. Hasp is hinged at top to a band which crosses the lid to form the hinge on the other side and continues down back across the bottom to the lock in the front, ring at top for suspension. Box is perhaps 15th century.

The main interest of the box is its purpose. Charles Boucher, in his definitive article on St. Peter’s in an earlier volume of the *Transactions*, wrote ‘The parish tradition is that it was used for reserving the sacrament, but it is evident that it was a box for keeping a valuable object, such as a seal or possibly money’.<sup>1</sup> Cox and Harvey, in one of the standard books on church furnishings, refer to a ‘circular wooden iron-bound box with three locks in a church at Bristol’, evidently the St. Peter’s box, and wrote that it was mistakenly supposed to be a pyx although they suggested no other possible use for it.<sup>2</sup>

The parish tradition, that is an ‘ancient host box’, cannot be lightly dismissed. For churchmen no more valuable object can be conceived than the reserved sacrament and, although it might well be supposed that a pyx would be made of something more precious than wood, wooden pyxes were known even in the 16th century. Henry VII, in his will, provided for the manufacture of enough silver gilt pyxes to ensure that every parish church and friary had a suitable vessel for reserving the sacrament. He had seen ‘to our inwarde regrete and displeasure’ that many churches kept ‘the holie Sacrament of the Aulter . . . in ful [foul?] simple and inhonest Pixes specially Pixes of cope and tymbre’.<sup>3</sup>

It was the usual practice in England to reserve the sacrament in a veiled hanging pyx over the high altar. The St. Peter’s box has a ring at the top so that it can be suspended. It is hard to see what other purpose the ring could have served and harder still to imagine why a box for money or seals would have needed to be hung anywhere.

The form of the box, its ring for suspension, the fact that it is lockable, and the parish



Fig. 1 The 'ancient host box' of St. Peter's church, Bristol (F. Little)

tradition combine to make it probable that it is indeed a medieval pyx. The fact that it was made of wood explains why, unlike most church plate, it was not confiscated at the Reformation. Moreover, there could be documentary evidence of its survival. An inventory of 1552, reproduced by Boucher in his article, refers to 'the old pykes and ij clothes for hym'.<sup>4</sup>

If it was a medieval wooden pyx, the St. Peter's box was a unique survival in the early 20th century. Only three metal pyxes are known to have survived — the Godsfield and Swinburne pyxes in the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Exning pyx in the British Museum — but not a single wooden one. We can only deplore that the St. Peter's pyx was destroyed in the war but the discovery of this photograph and detailed description has provided an invaluable record of it.

#### Notes

1. *TBGAS* 32 (1909), 299–300.
2. Cox, J.C. and Harvey, A., *English Church Furniture* (1907), 43.
3. *Ibid.* 44.
4. *TBGAS* 32, 288.