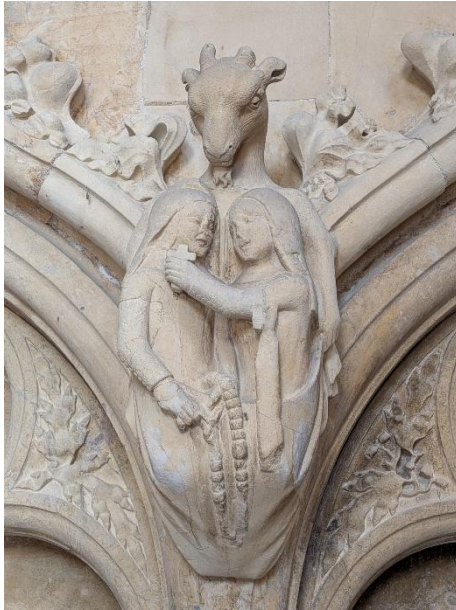


## Widows, Wives and Wayward Nuns: Medieval Women around Beverley

'Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence', as commonly quoted by historians, is certainly true of what we know of the lives of medieval women. They were regarded as chattels of their husbands or male relatives. For wives this was enshrined in the law of "couverture" meaning that women were literally "covered" by their husbands. Defined by their marital status rather than their occupation, women had limited legal rights. They were considered legally incompetent along with children, criminals and the insane. They were transmitters rather than owners of property, a condition that continued for many centuries.



Bearing the brunt of the Catholic doctrine of original sin, they were considered the weaker sex not just physically but morally, intellectually and temperamentally, and blamed for the fall of man. "The curse God pronounced still weighs on the world ... you are the Devil's gateway" said Tertullian, one of the early church fathers whose writings underpinned much of medieval theology. Aristotle, among other Greeks whose writings had been rediscovered in Muslim Spain and admired by the medieval elite, said "The relation of male to female is by nature a relation of superior to inferior and ruler to ruled."

Left: The Devil as goat carries errant nuns to hell, Beverley Minster.

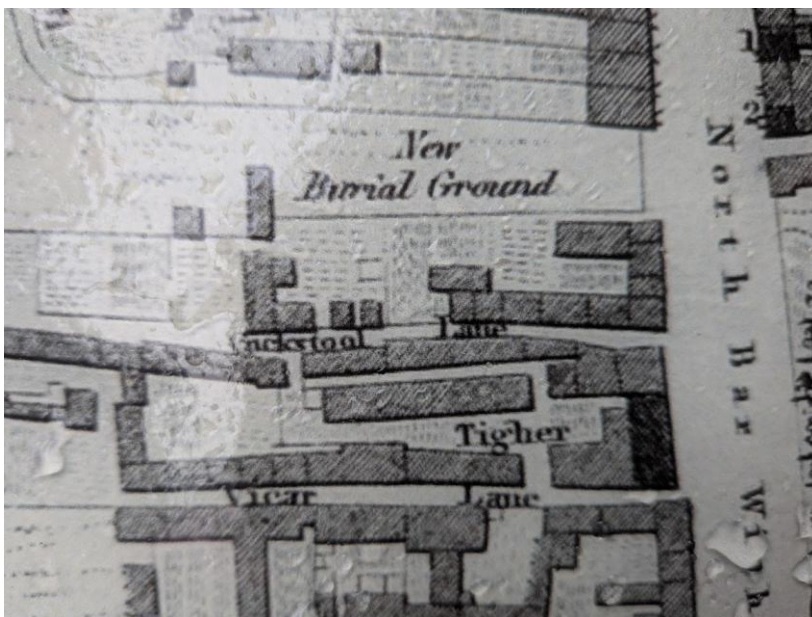
So, not a great status for women in a rigidly hierarchical society expecting obedience and acceptance of shame, but of course reality was often very different, and as medieval historian Helen Jewell points out "*Disadvantaged does not equate with downtrodden*".



Few misericords in our churches represent women but these two in Beverley Minster show a typical medieval misogynistic stereotype, the scold. There are many historic synonyms, none flattering: shrew, harridan, harpy, termagant, virago, nag, and all describe women. The assumption was even formalised in a sentence for schoolboys to practise writing in a copybook of

1508: *"It is the properte of a woman to use scoldyng"*.

Here in Beverley the woman is beating her husband with a staff (the rod is broken off). Meanwhile a dog takes advantage of the distraction by stealing food from the pot. In the adjacent misericord the woman is being carted off by her husband (she's still hanging on to his hair) in what would have been a 'cucking stool'. This was a barrow through which she could be paraded around the streets to be shamed.



Cucking stools are evidenced from the 13<sup>th</sup> century and Wood's map of Beverley of 1828 shows what is now Tiger Lane (from the eponymous former inn on North Bar Within) as Cuckstool Lane, an extraordinary survival. The cucking stool (probably from the Dutch 'cukken', to defecate as it was originally a sort of commode) was a predecessor of the ducking stool, which

wasn't introduced until the late 16<sup>th</sup> century and was used to duck miscreants (usually women) in the Bar Dyke at North Bar. Even later, from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, was the scold's bridle, which physically and painfully would restrain the tongue.

Evidence from 15<sup>th</sup> century Kent shows that the cucking stools were predominantly used to humiliate women (94 women, only 13 men).



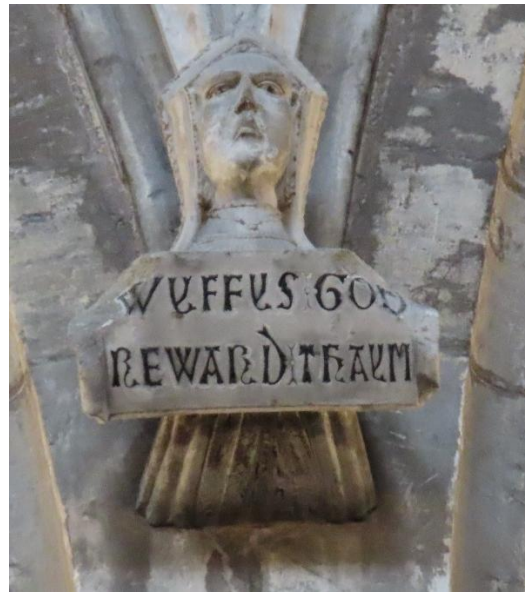
Image from the Ellesmere Chaucer (Wikimedia): Chaucer's Wife of Bath from the Canterbury Tales. Note she rides astride the horse not side-saddle, unlike say the Prioress. Thanks to Barbara English for pointing this out.

Chaucer's Wife of Bath gives a counterblast to the misogynistic view of medieval women. In her prologue she attacks the sexual paranoia of those churchmen who condemned wives, and widows who remarried. According to some of the early church fathers like St Jerome, there was a hierarchy of women based on their sexuality: virgins would receive a hundred-fold reward in heaven, widows a sixty-fold and wives just a thirty-fold. The Wife of Bath challenges the hypocrisy of glorifying chastity, for example, as contrary to God's instruction to 'go forth and multiply'.

She boasts of her five husbands (the legal norm for female marriage was from 12, for men 14). The first three were good husbands because they were rich and old, the last two bad because one was a lecher and the last had to be tamed after he had tormented her with beatings and readings from misogynistic writers. She burnt his books and subdued him. *'Lies, tears and spinning are the things God gives By nature to a woman, while she lives. So there's one thing at least that I can boast, That in the end I always ruled the roast; Cunning or force was sure to make them stumble, And always keeping up a steady grumble.'* So, method in the madness of the scold ...

Her actual tale is a story about a knight who, accused of rape in the age of chivalry, is given a reprieve from the queen on condition that, within a year, he discovers what women truly desire. He roams the kingdom but cannot find the same answer twice:

could it be freedom, riches, sex, to be confided in, and more. He returns in despair, but on route finds a group of dancing maids who disappear to leave a single crone. She will tell him the secret in return for being granted her first request on his return to court. And the secret is ... to have mastery over their husbands and lovers. The queen and her ladies agree, the rapist is spared, but the crone makes her demand... marriage. He agrees, with horror, but she convinces him to embrace her, as gentility should prevail over desire and a loyal wife would be preferable to an unfaithful attractive one (another medieval stereotype). Then she morphs to a beautiful maiden, of course. The wife ends her tale with a theologically suspect prayer: ‘... *may Christ Jesus send Us husbands meek and young and fresh in bed, And grace to overbid them when we wed. And – Jesu hear my prayer! – cut short the lives, Of those who won’t be governed by their wives.*’



For a very different picture of medieval wifedom let’s go to St Mary’s Church in Beverley where on the capitals of pillars on the north aisle (above) are the carved heads of the ‘good wives’ who contributed to the rebuilding of the nave after the tower collapsed in 1520. Here we see two unnamed women: ‘*These two pillars are made by the good wives. May God reward them.*’ There’s nothing frivolous or sexy about the portrayal of these wives: literally stern pillars of the community. No husbands are named here: they may have been members of the religious Guild of The Virgin or they may have been widows.

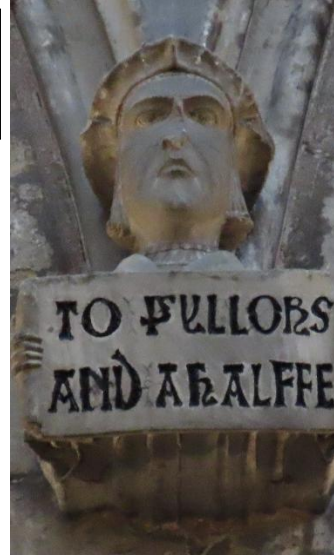
There is also a named ‘good wife’, Joanna Crossley, next to her husband John. ‘*John Crossley mercatoris [merchant] and his wife made these two pillars and a half.*’ (Did they run out of money I wondered but no, one pillar is embedded in the west end wall.) Another head of John asks in Latin for the saints to pray for his soul and on the other side of the pillar, for the souls of him and his wife. Note the use of both Latin and English here, on the cusp of Protestantism and the Reformation: hedging their bets?

However upright the wives, John was no saint. Six times Keeper of Beverley, he was a churchwarden in 1531 when he came before the Star Chamber accused of fighting over a rent dispute at the Bull Inn (where the modern Rose and Crown stands) armed with

swords, bows and arrows and billhooks. Barbara English quotes court evidence that they ‘fought like butchers’ dogs’. We don’t know the outcome.



John Crossley and his Wife  
on their two and a half pillars



In Beverley Minster, here is a statue of a woman cradling a dog. This could have been symbolic of faithfulness in an ideal wife. I like her benign expression. Another interpretation, however, is that it is an admonishment, for she is bestowing her resources and attention on an animal rather than the deserving poor.

The misericord with the man washing up (below left) would have been satirical, and is overlooked by an image of a fool (not in photo), laughing at his subordination.

The mischievous carvers were an itinerant band of craftsmen who loved irreverence and satire, alongside moral tales. After all, the misericords (‘mercy seats’ for the rear ends of weary canons) in the choirs were hidden and seen only by the occupants, as the chancel was out of bounds to ordinary folk in the Middle Ages. Some carvings represent the medieval paranoia (or secret yearning for) the social order being upset, for example by controlling wives. Another Minster misericord shows the cart pulling the horse.



One of the misericords in St Mary’s tells a very different story (page 6), a very ancient tale with roots in folklore, seen also in Worcester cathedral, likely from a ‘pattern book’ of themes: this is the story of The Clever Daughter. A peasant in debt to a king

offers his daughter to take on a task. The king stipulates: she must neither travel on foot or on horseback, be neither clothed nor unclothed, and bring a gift that is not a gift. So we see her arriving with one foot on the ground, wearing a net, and carrying a rabbit which promptly escapes. She wins and marries the king. It's thought the king on the left might be Richard the Lionheart, for whatever reason. The St Mary's misericords are earlier than those of the Minster, from around 1445.



Wives had no rights to own property but widowhood gave legal identity. Most wives would remain 'couverte' even though they may be vital to their husbands' businesses. An advantage of being a 'femme couverte' was that they would not be recognised as criminally responsible (their husbands would take the rap). Some wives chose to register as 'femmes sole', which would give them more freedom but also legal responsibility if things went wrong.

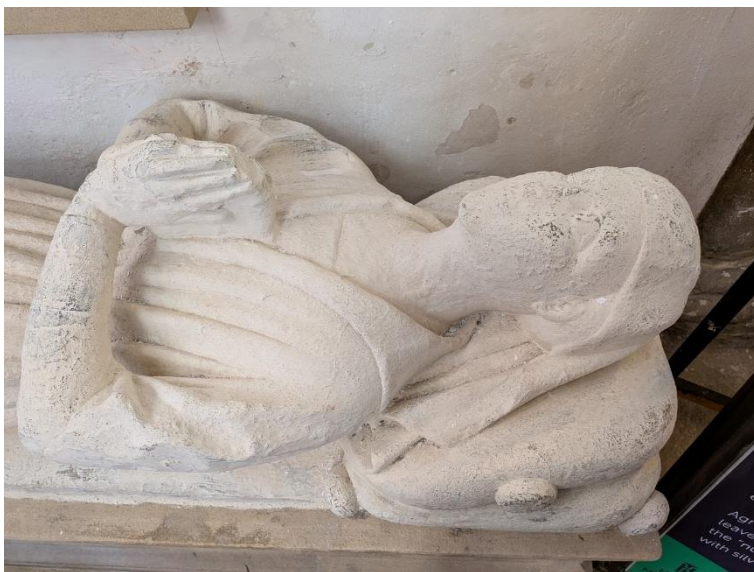
Widows, however, could take over a business and make wills. On marriage a wife might agree to a 'dower' from her husband guaranteeing a third of his lands and/or chattels if he died first. This was a legal minefield as court records show, with many disputes if land was sold or boundaries confused. What we would think of as a 'dowry' was known as a 'portion', provided by the wife's family. On death the old practice of 'legitim' became fairly standardised in common law as time went on: a third of the man's property would go to his wife (only for her lifetime), a third to his children and the remainder in gifts or

bequest to the poor, servants or friends, and usually for prayers for his soul or to religious communities. However the legal status of medieval women is often unclear and there were exceptions to the powerlessness of women.

Barbara English tells the story of Hawisa, only legitimate child of William le Gros, Count of Aumale, Lord of Holderness. She had somehow resisted marriage but within months of inheriting the title on William's death in 1179, with her lands and great wealth she had been married off by King Henry II. He could do this as she was a tenant-in-chief of his, in a still feudal society. She was married off two more times but when all three husbands were dead she paid King John the huge sum of 5 thousand marks, to buy back her lands and to guarantee she would be taken off the marriage market. Described by a contemporary as '*a woman who is almost a man*' she ran her estates and issued charters throughout, often favouring female tenants. Surely she must be the inspiration for the Lady le Gros pub in Beverley, demolished for housing in 2016.

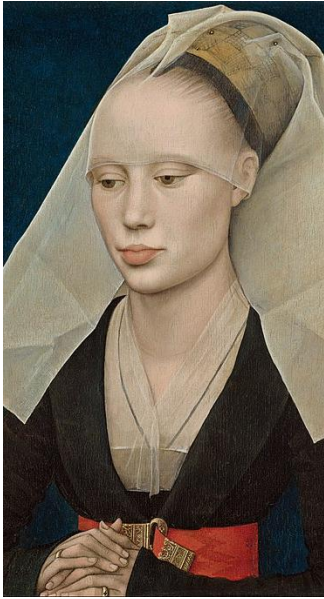
One estimate suggests only a fifth of merchants survived their wives, so widowhood was common, and the wealthier the widow the more she became currency, to pass on her property and land. In 1401 one Elias Casse of Beverley insisted in his will that his future widow should take vows before she inherited. This might have been less harsh than it appears. Widows would sometimes become nuns as a preferable fate to being bartered in the marriage market and enduring endless pregnancies and child loss.

The upper levels of Beverley merchant society would also try to marry where they could into the landowning classes. Agnes Creyke, a widow of a Beverley merchant, married Robert Hildyard of Winestead. A daughter of John Holme married into the St. Quintin family and a daughter of Thomas Frost married John Roos of Routh. This could of course work both ways, and it did more so in later centuries when the 'nouveau riche' might bail out or enrich struggling landowners.



The importance of hierarchy and marrying into at least your own social stratum, and marriage as business deal was clear from the story of Agnes Bedford (1390? to 1459), whose effigy (left) has been restored and is in Hull Minster. She was married three times, the first two husbands merchants from Newcastle and the last John Bedford, grain merchant of Hull. Her father and all her husbands were MPs and either sheriffs or

mayors, and all rich merchants from port towns trading with the Baltic and Low Countries. Her first marriage was to the richer of two suitors, whose case was contested and decided in church court by no less than the Bishop of Durham.



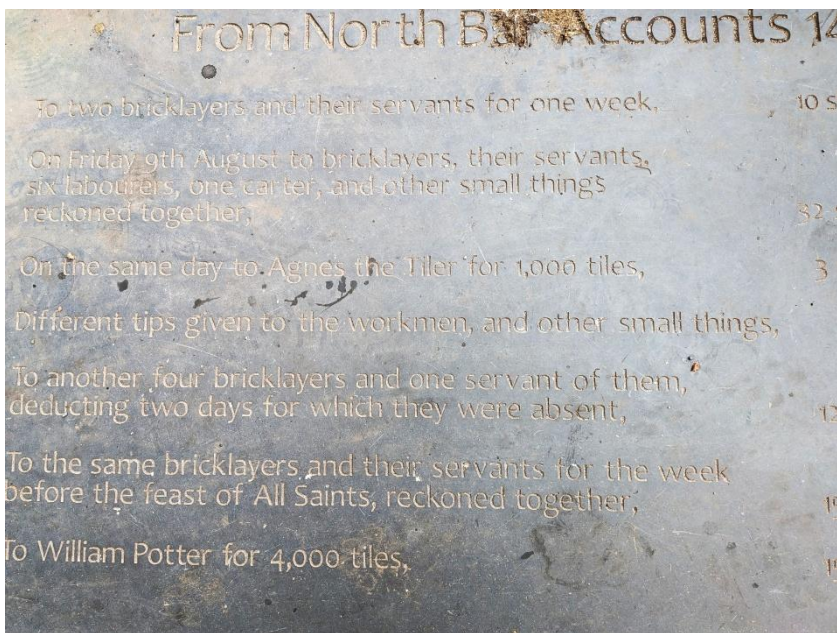
Her effigy was found in rubble blocking a former chantry chapel during restoration work in 1822. There's a good website describing how modern researchers into Hull Minster's history worked out who she was. They used clues from her clothing to establish a rough date, and fragments of 15<sup>th</sup> century stained glass to narrow down her provenance. Her clothing and the templars (metal cylinders) left in her will to net her hair, adorned with pearls, were compared to portraits such as this by a Dutch master of the same period.

Her last husband had been buried with his first wife in the south aisle but he had installed heraldic symbols in stained glass to recognise her father's and her previous husband's family.



Like John Crossley, John Bedford took the law into his own hands, arrested in 1437 for piracy as he had attacked a Dutch ship which he claimed was an act of revenge. Such raids were not uncommon and he got away with it.

Above left: Rogier van der Weyden Portrait of a Lady (Wikimedia Commons) and heraldic glass of Agnes Bedford's family from Hull Minster <https://www.hullminsterheritage.org.uk/research/meet-our-unknown-lady-and-her-possible-identity>



Of the lives of more ordinary women we know even less. This plaque beside North Bar built in 1409 (page 9) tells us of Agnes the Tiler whose tiles (another name for bricks), possibly produced from the alluvial clays around Grovehill (then a settlement by the River Hull called Grovel), were used for the gate. We do guess from the plaque (and other sources) that there was not equal pay.

Agnes got paid 3s. for her 1000 tiles whereas William Potter got 15s for 4000. She was probably the widow of a tiler who'd taken over the family business. There will have been

other females and children among the anonymous labourers mentioned in the accounts, but she is the only woman named.



Among the early 16th century roof bosses of St Mary's is this one of 'The Alewife', left, a typically unflattering image. It was usually women who produced ale at home until the late Middle Ages, when hops were introduced, which kept the ale fresh for longer and at this point brewing began to be industrialised and the role of women diminished.

The alewife was a figure of mockery in much medieval literature and art, usually depicted as a crone or depraved. There is some suggestion, contentious, that the alewife became the stereotype of the later witch: a broom or 'ale-stick' went outside the house when the brew was ready for sale, she would keep a cat to keep mice out of the grain and may have worn a pointy hat to stand

out in the marketplace. The Assize of Bread and Ale was a 13<sup>th</sup> century regulatory act not repealed until the 19<sup>th</sup> century and most of those accused of dodgy practice were women. The ale-tasters, or 'ale-conners' were nearly always men. Everyone drank ale,

weaker than now, due to the poor quality of the water supply. A gallon a day wasn't unusual.

Other occupations like laundress were exclusively female, and there were many female servants, particularly in urban centres. There may have been a gender imbalance of females in medieval Beverley due to the number of servants, often spinsters. Spinning too was a female occupation. The spinning wheel didn't arrive in Europe until the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Using the drop spindle allowed women to walk about doing other things such as carry children, so the invention, although more productive, was more tying. It is unclear how many guilds admitted women. Hull banned women from the weaving guild but York didn't. Women's overt participation in guilds and industry was usually around food, ale, clothing, religion and the decorative arts, although there must have been much hidden support by women helping business at home. One York armourer left his tools for making solid armour to his son, and those to make finer chain mail to his daughter.

Women from the villages would bring surplus food into market to sell: butter, cheese, eggs for example and might be called 'hucksters'. There were two practices technically illegal but which seemed quite common: regrating and forestalling, often done by women. The latter involved stopping a trader coming into town, buying his stock and selling it at a higher price, and regrating was similar.



This reconstruction of a dwelling in the Ryedale Folk Museum (above) shows what the home of a prosperous peasant might look like in the North York Moors. Cruck-built

houses like these were uncommon in the East Riding due to lack of timber, and most would be made of daub, basically mud, straw and dung held together by wattles of hazel. There would be plenty of reeds locally for the roof. Fireplaces did not exist until late Middle Ages, and the smoke from a central hearth would percolate through the thatch, killing pests.

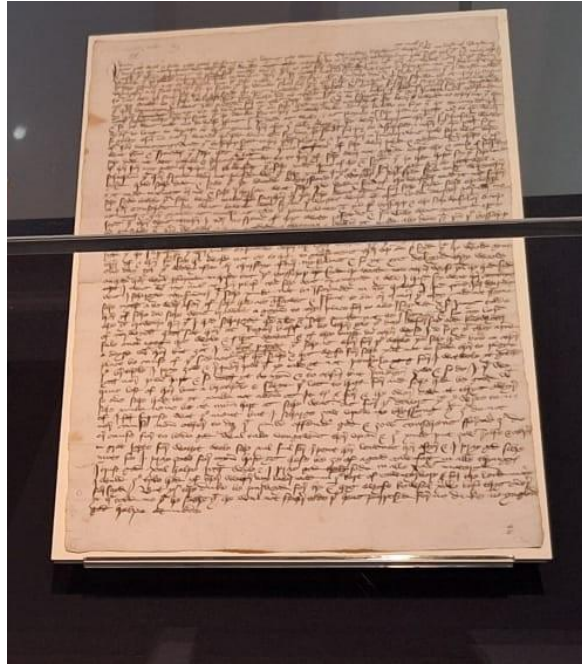
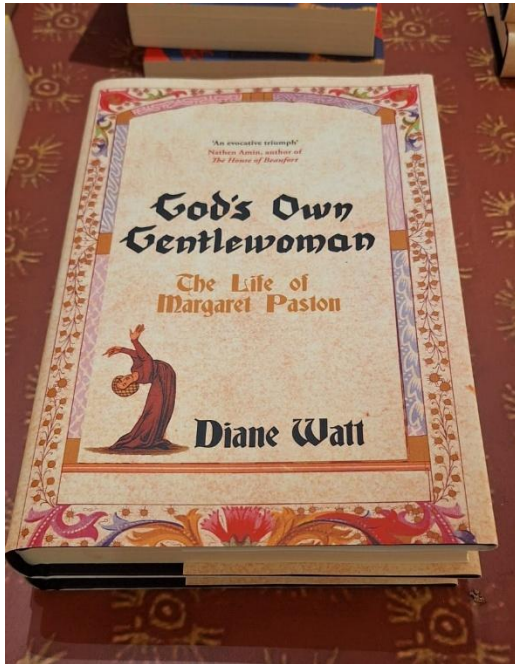


Here the wife would 'rule the roast', in charge of all household tasks including milking and tending the beasts who lived at the other end of the house with doors on both sides to let air and water in for cleaning after milking (above). Medieval woodcuts and artworks show women engaged in many farming tasks, particularly lighter work in the fields: weeding, winnowing, sowing, goading the oxen for example while the men would do the tougher jobs like ploughing. There were many grades of peasants, free or otherwise, especially later in the Middle Ages and some would have servants.

The Black Death dealt a final blow to feudalism as well as at least a third of the population in 1348/49, leading to shortage of labour and the inability of landlords to keep their workforce. The state also tried to keep the lower orders under control. The Statute of Labourers of 1351 began the tradition of yearly hiring fairs which lasted for several centuries, where workers, men and women, would have yearly contracts to stay in one place.

Managing large estates and a multitude of servants was no easy job, and would often fall to women. The letters of Margaret Paston, wealthy wife of Norfolk, are a wonderful

record, as displayed in the British Library Medieval Women exhibition of 2024. One letter is to her husband who is in London fighting a law suit while she is defending one of their estates from an attack. She asks in her shopping list: *'Send me crossbows, arrows, poleaxes and armour for the servants'* then asks for a pound of almonds and some sugar and cloth. This letter (below), to her son John, confirms she has ostracised one of her own daughters for marrying a mere estate manager. *'Remember we have lost of her nothing but a brethel [good-for-nothing].'* Status before family.



- 4 'To each leper man and woman at the five gates in Norwich, 3 pence.'
- 5 'I bequeath to the said Anne [Paston, my daughter], my featherbed with pillow, curtains and tester, in my parlour at Mautby'
- 6 'I bequeath to Constance, bastard daughter of John Paston, knight, when she is twenty year of age, 10 marks.'
- 7 'I bequeath to Agnes Swan, my servant, my mustre-de-velys [half-velvet] gown, furred with black, and a girdle of black, harnessed with silver gilt and enamelled, and 20 shillings in money.'

One of the interesting things about these letters is that she didn't write them herself. They were all scribed for her, possibly by a son. So she was untutored in writing, despite her abilities and intelligence. Such was the case too with the Book of Margery Kempe whom we'll meet shortly.

Margaret's will is revealing, typical of the bequests in wealthier families. She leaves bequests to the poor and sick (for her soul?); furniture and soft furnishings to a daughter; money for her son's illegitimate daughter whom she raised, and money and clothing to her servants. Everything was of value and recycled.

In Beverley, wills reveal similar patterns. Maud Wharram bequeathed a feather bed and its coverings, an old robe, and four silver spoons in 1330. In 1398 Agnes, the wife of

William Bird, shipman, bequeathed her clothes to her friends and relations, including hoods, a veil and lambskins. Eight women received gifts of cloth or clothing under Agnes's will.



In 1477 John Coppandale gave his servant Alice Sands the right to live in one of the four houses he'd built next to St Mary's churchyard. Agnes Hilyard left a house in Wood Lane (left) to the poor, singling out a servant called Cecily who had served her mother.

Marriage didn't legally have to take place in church until 1753, although ceremonies became popular after the Reformation. From the 13<sup>th</sup> century marriages could take place at the church door but could happen anywhere as long as vows, similar to present ones, were exchanged. There was no need for parental consent but there were consanguinity rules (such as the one which allowed Henry V111 to find a dubious loophole for his divorce from Catherine of Aragon). Gifts, which were not necessarily rings, were exchanged. This loose system

caused a lot of bother when legality was in dispute.

(Below: 14<sup>th</sup> century marriage image: British Library Royal MS 6 E VI, fol. 104 Wikimedia public domain)



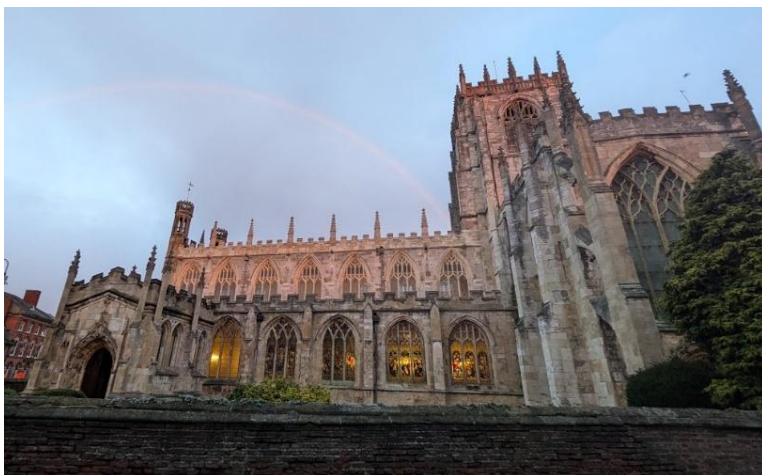
Here's a description of a typical marriage from a witness in a court case in York from 1372 (Leyser 1995) involving a John Beke, saddler, and his intended, Marjory, who said

their vows in the house of a tanner friend: *‘John said, “Margery, here I take you as my wife for better or worse, to have and to hold to the end of my life and of this I give you my faith”.’* Margery said likewise and they kissed through a garland of flowers. Such marriages were legal, though described as ‘clandestine’ by the church.

In 1217 the English church issued a statute including the warning: *‘No man should place a ring of reeds or another material, vile or precious, on a young woman’s hand in jest, that he may more easily fornicate with her, lest, while he thinks himself joking, he pledge himself to the burdens of matrimony’.* In other words, sex equalled marriage, and there was no divorce, just the unlikely recourse of proving the marriage illegal.

Mothers had no legal right to the custody of children, and higher status women at widowhood might see their offspring taken as wards by high born families to be educated (and to cream off their income until they inherited). Wards were vulnerable. Robert Constable of Flamborough Castle, who was hanged in chains from the walls of Hull’s Beverley Gate after his part in the Pilgrimage of Grace in 1536, was known to have abducted a young ward from a rival and betrothed her to his son.

Unfortunate Anne Cresacre, abducted from Bishop Burton, was the ward in question. She lost her father at a year old, her mother remarried and her husband let his lawyer betroth Anne to his son. She’d already been the victim of another failed abduction before Constable and his men carried her off in 1524, after which the Court of Star Chamber made her a ward of the king and she ended up marrying the son of Thomas More. *‘And so she sits, a demure little figure, in the background of Holbein’s famous picture of the More family, then aged fifteen,’* says F.W. Brooks in his 1954 pamphlet on Yorkshire and the Star Chamber. One wonders what happened to her after Thomas More was executed. Her grandson did manage to recover the family estates.



An important ceremony that would take place at the church door was ‘churching’, the purification of women around 40 days after giving birth. Although this implies that the mother was unclean, which again has a religious origin, it gave the mother and child some respite after birth.

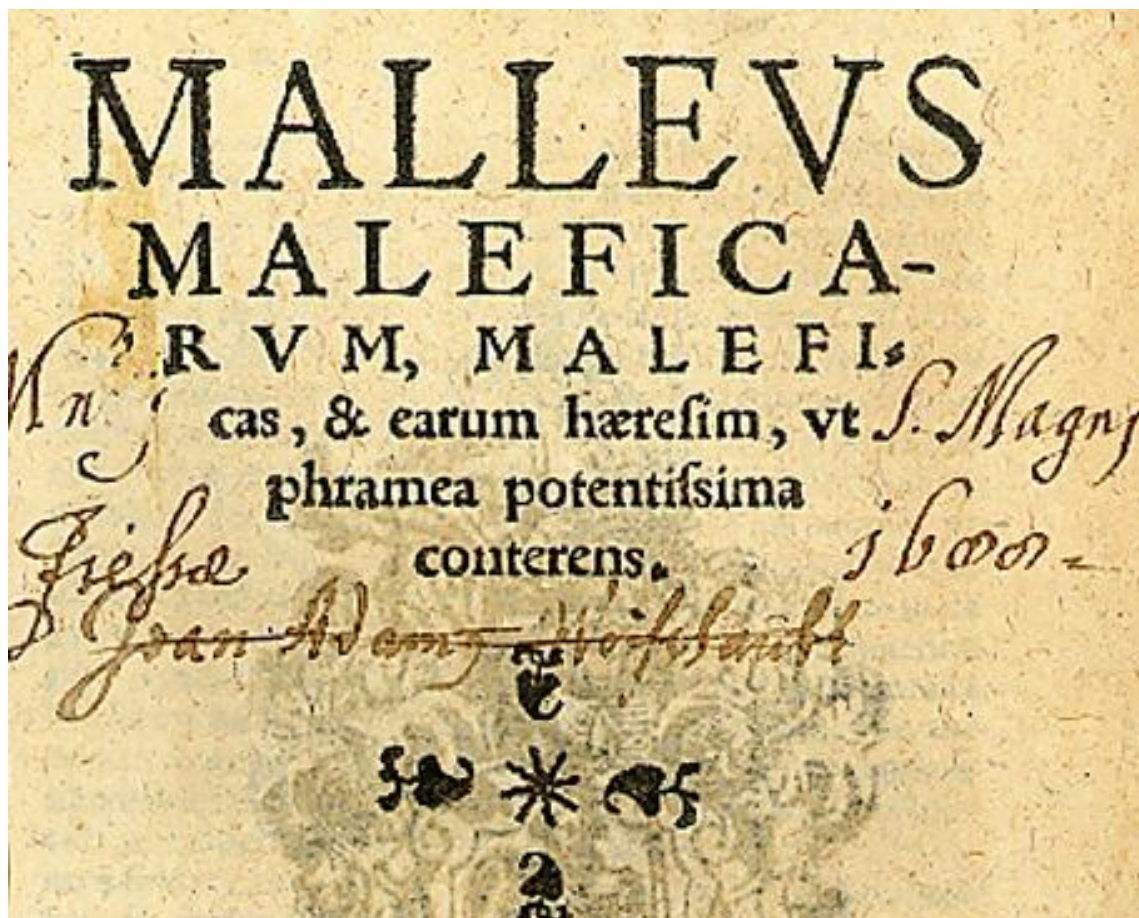
Left: St Mary’s Church Beverley

This period became known as the ‘gander month’ as husbands would have to do the chores. During pregnancy women had legal protection from being beaten (but otherwise not), and from fasting.



This rare item is a birth girdle (around 1500 from the Wellcome Collection), which has been tested and contains bodily fluids and other substances which show it has been well used. It also contains symbols like dice and incantations to the Virgin to give safety to mother and child.

By the 14<sup>th</sup> century women had been banned from universities and in 1457 Henry V banned women from practising ‘fysik’, but most women would rely on home remedies and local healers, and midwives would be women. Midwifery was a career fraught with danger. Childbirth was a time of vulnerability when the Devil was waiting to pounce and midwives themselves became increasingly demonised.

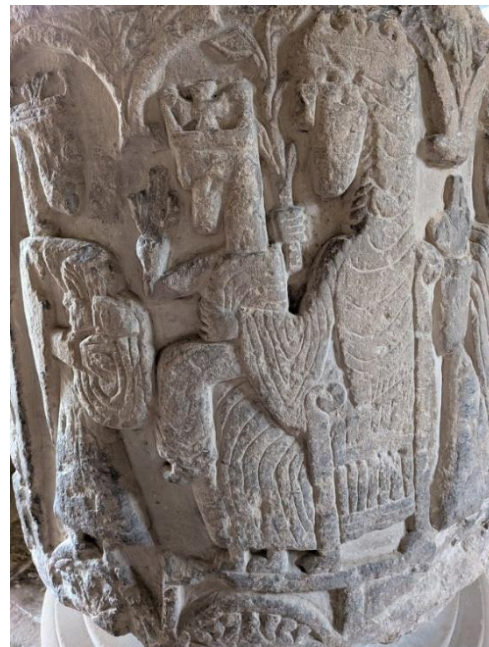


In 1486 the Malleus Maleficarum (the Hammer of Witches), (above from Wikipedia) was written in Cologne and became an international best seller. This dreadful tome

reiterated the old theme that the female body was the vessel of sin, that the Devil worked through midwives to slaughter innocents, and that he would infect women if she had one of three vices: infidelity, lust and ambition.



The worst of the witch hunting days were post-medieval but this was a harbinger. Local healers would rely on herbs, some of which were potentially lethal like deadly nightshade, hemlock and opium poppy, three of the key ingredients of the medieval anaesthetic called dwale. All of these grow in the wild locally, some like hemlock (left) profusely along the River Hull. Being a healer was a dangerous craft demanding great skill and nerve.



The Norman font in St Mary's at Cowlam in the Wolds (above) has carvings on opposite sides of the font showing two stereotypes of women which seem to persist to this day.

On one side is Eve, taking the apple from the serpent and leading the human race into everlasting sin and suffering. On the other side is Mary the Virgin, here elevated to Queen of Heaven, also seen here in the church of St Mary at Swine (left) and on the restored murals in St Peter and St Paul's in Pickering Church (over).



The cult of the Virgin reached its apogee in the Middle Ages. Her statues in the naves of St Mary's and Beverley Minster were the focus of many offerings and prayers. Mary was a role model for women in their sufferings: childbirth and loss of children in particular.

All this retreated in the Reformation, except among recusant Catholics, as her worship represented the ultimate in false idolatry to Protestants.

Jonathan Foyle, who gave a talk in 2025 about the architecture of churches in our St Mary's, pointed out its crenelations above the West Door which he claimed might represent the fortress of her virginity, and the stone roses around the church her garden, to negate Eve's Fall. He called Mary the 'Omnimother' and described other churches consecrated to her with what he suggested were similar features. With this devotion to Mary and other female saints officially demoted after the Reformation, so went the feminine and much of the mystical from everyday religion, and in came the hard-edged commands of 'The Word'. Imagery and 'idolatry' of all the other saints was outlawed too, most of the female ones having been martyred either defending their faith or their virginity.

About one in twenty people in the Middle Ages were known as 'the Religious', as they gained their livelihoods from the church. This beautiful object (below), as shown in the British Library exhibition, is signed: '*Joan of Beverley, a nun, made me.*' We know this only from the needle marks left after the thread of the signature rotted. The embroidered side reads, translated: *In the hour of our death help us Lord.* It may have been part of a funeral pall and is dated to the 13<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup> century, stitched from linen, silk and silver gilt.





Much of our evidence about the life of nuns around medieval Beverley tells of their misdeeds, as there were visitations from senior male ecclesiastics when concerns were raised about the nuns' conduct. There were two double priories originally, at Watton and Swine, but unsurprisingly housing nuns and monks together in the same precinct didn't last long. (Left: photo of partial remains of Watton Priory by John Armagh (Wikimedia Commons CC 4.0))

The most well-known of our local wayward nuns is from the Gilbertine Priory at Watton who became pregnant by a lay brother around 1160. She was forced to castrate him herself, by her fellow nuns, records claim. Next the story turns into a miracle tale. After a visit by the Abbot Ailred of Rievaulx there was no evidence of pregnancy, her chains had fallen from her, and her virtue was restored. One can only guess what really happened to her and the child. Marcus Ramsden says she became an oblate at only four years old.



At the Cistercian Priory of Swine where we can still see earthworks of old fishponds (left), and where part of the current church contains some of the old priory church, we hear in 1286 from a visitation by Archbishop Gifford: *'Two windows, through which the food and drink of the canons and conversi were passed, were not properly kept by the nuns, so that suspected confabulations between the canons and conversi on the one part, and the nuns and sisters on the other, frequently took place... The household of Robert de Hiltun, Knight, wandered dissolutely about the cloister and parlour, and in a very*

*suspicious manner conversed with the nuns and sisters, whence danger was suspected... Alice de Scruteville, Beatrix de St. Quintin, and Maud Constable and others were rebellious.'* The names tell us that these nuns were of local aristocratic birth and Swine was indeed quite a wealthy priory.

We hear later tales of fornication and, oddly, some remarks about dress that suggest nuns were getting uppity about their clothing. They were threatened with excommunication, no less, if they wore *barred girdles* or *ornamented their tunics in a curious fashion*. However, at the last visitation prior to dissolution, when the

commissioners were expressly looking for bad behaviour, they only found one pregnant nun at Swine, Elizabeth Copley, from a liaison with a priest.

Nunkeeling on the other hand (below left) was a small and relatively impoverished priory. Some of the original stone was reused to form the 19<sup>th</sup> century church which is itself now in ruins, and part of the old walls are incorporated into the wall of the farmhouse



next door. In 1299 the nuns were covenanted to celebrate the obit of Master William de Haxby, Canon of Beverley. One of the perks for this was that they were to brew a gallon of ale each for themselves *'well worth a penny and a pittance of the same value.'*

There were visitations here too which found disobedience, stealing of alms and several examples of *'incontinence'*. Two named monks of Meaux, Brother Robert de Merflet and Brother Stephen de Ulram, got around. They were found guilty in 1310 of *incontinence* with nuns of both Swine and Nunkeeling.



Another story of a local renegade nun recently discovered by researchers at York University was a 'Joanna of Leeds' who resourcefully faked her own death in 1318 abetted by her fellow nuns at St Clements Priory near York and fled to Beverley. The Archbishop wrote to the Dean of Beverley demanding

her return *'as she now wanders at large to the notorious peril of her soul'*. Outcome unknown. It seems the church was generally forgiving to errant nuns, as long as they did penance and were never allowed out on their own again.

There were many reasons why women would join holy orders. Most were from wealthy families who could afford it, some surplus females: spinsters, children or widows, but

for some it must have been a refuge from being pawns and brood mares in the marriage game. For many it brought an education and companionship. There must have been those who sought a spiritual life too, as for religious people, which was theoretically everybody, the afterlife was more important than this one. After the dissolution, some of the nuns stayed together, with pensions but in relative poverty to the ends of their days.



An extreme form of escape from the world would be to become an anchoress. We know that there were at least two attached to St Giles Hospital in Beverley. A named anchoress, Margaret de Walshawe, was attached to St Nicholas Hospital, near the church of the patron saint of fishermen based at Holme by the end of Beverley Beck, our medieval port area.

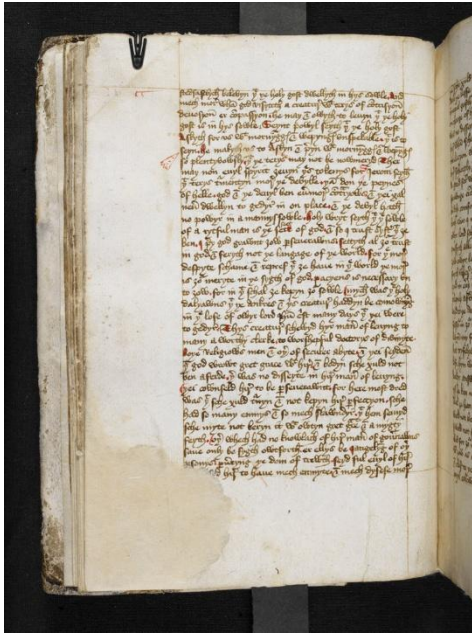
Left: Enclosing of an anchoress (14th

century). Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 079: Pontifical, CC BY-NC-SA

Anchorites (usually women) were considered especially holy and attracted many bequests for their chapels. 'Entombed' in their room next to the church, they would have a servant and often a cat for company. They would usually have three windows, one into the church, one for the servant delivering food and chamber pots, and one into the street. Here they could be foci of local gossip, advice, prayer and teaching.



(Photos of the site of the old St Nicholas Church and a modern street named after St Giles Hospital ). The most famous anchoress, Julian of Norwich, wrote the well-known quote of 'radical optimism': *'All shall be well, and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well'*. She also had something rather endearing to say about our own Saint John: *"Our Lorde showed him full and hyly in comfort of us for homelynesse, and brought to my mynde how he is a kynde neighbour and of our knowing"*. Homeliness and kindness? A slightly different take on our very own saint here from the usual stories of dramatic miracles and flags borne into battle to vanquish foes.



Finally to the extraordinary 'religious' Margery Kempe who was brought to Beverley and briefly imprisoned for an inquisition with the Archbishop. In 1934, a Colonel W, Butler Bowden, while looking for a ping pong bat, came across a tatty book which, in his frustration, he wanted to burn (image left, British Library, Wikipedia). Dissuaded by a friend, he showed it to an expert who confirmed it was genuine, the Book of Margery Kempe. The oldest autobiography by a woman ever found, like the letters of Margaret Paston it had been scribed for her. In her own extraordinary voice it tells of her visions, pilgrimages across Europe, a visit to Julian of Norwich, preaching and emoting throughout England, and constant inquisitions and threats of burning for heresy. Utterly fearless, she took on archbishops, friars and priests in her mission to

convey the depth of suffering of Christ and our need for humility. Known for weeping and prostrating herself, she was loved by some and loathed by others, but somehow survived.

Wife of a King's Lynn merchant, she ran two failed businesses (alewife and miller) before paying off her husband's debts with inherited money in exchange for being absolved from her 'marriage debt' (sexual relations), and becoming a pilgrim, preacher and mystic. It's thought she had what would now be diagnosed as post-partum psychosis, in her own admission becoming mad for a while after childbirth, and having visions of Christ's suffering to save mankind. She had 14 children before setting off on her new life in 1415 at the age of around 40. This involved danger, poverty, tears, wandering, and challenging all those, particularly churchmen of whatever rank, for their lack of piety.

Here's her story of being apprehended in Hessel and brought to Beverley:

*Than thei browt hir agen into Hesel, and ther men callyd hir loller, and women cam rennyng owt of her howsys wyth her rokkys [staves], crying to the pepil, "Brennyth [burn] this fals heretyk."*

*So, as sche went forth to Beverleward wyth the seyde yemen and the frerys beforne seyde, thei mettyn many tymes wyth men of the cuntré, which seyde unto hir, "Damsel, forsake this lyfe that thou hast, and go spyne and carde as other women don, and suffyr not so meche schame and so meche wo. We wolde not suffyr so meche for no good in erthe."*

*Than sche seyde to hem, "I suffyr not so meche sorwe as I wolde do for ower Lordys lofe, for I suffyr but schrewyd wordys, and ower merciful Lord Crist Jhesu, ... suffyrd hard strokys, bittyr scorgyngys, and schamful deth at the last for me and for al mankynde, blyssed mot he be. And therfor it is ryth nowt that I suffyr in regarde to that he suffyrd."*



In Beverley she was locked in an upstairs room (maybe like this one in St Mary's Court, North Bar Within) where the woman of the house defied her husband and got a ladder to bring her victuals:

*Than stode sche lokyng owt at a wyndown, tellyng many good talys to hem that wolde*

*heryn hir, in so meche that women wept sor and seyde wyth gret hevynes of her hertys, "Alas, woman, why schalt thou be brent?"*

*Than sche preyid the good wyfe of the hows to gevyn hir drynke, for sche was evyl for thyrste. And the good wife seyde hir husband had born away the key, wherfor sche myth not comyn to hir ne gevyn hir drynke. And than the women tokyn a leddy and set up to the wyndown and govyn hir a pynte of wyn in a potte and toke hir a pece, besechyng hir to settyn away the potte prevyly and the pece that whan the good man come he myth not aspye it.* From the Book of Margery Kempe.

She survived her inquisition: *The Erchebischof seyde unto hir, "I am evyl enformyd of the; I her seyn thou art a ryth wikked woman." And sche seyde ageyn, "Ser, so I her seyn that ye arn a wikkyd man."* How did she get away with saying this to the Archbishop of York in an age of such deference, and paranoia about heresy and Lollardy?

In the end, she returned to look after her husband after her extraordinary life. He was then incontinent, and she took to complaining about all the laundry.

A Yorkshire woman, Margaret Cheney of Wilton, did get burnt in Smithfield in 1536 for high treason as she had supported the Pilgrimage of Grace which launched from Beverley. This punishment was reserved for treasonous women. Her husband Sir John Boulmer got the hanging, drawing and quartering reserved for men. She had been sold to him by her first husband William Cheney, a vintner of London, making this one of the earliest recorded instances of wife-selling, a practice that became popular in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It's clear, however, from the trial records that the couple were devoted, had four children together and they had a babe-in-arms when she died. A Mabel Brigge from Holmpton in Holderness was also executed in 1538 for carrying out a 'Black Fast' with the intention of bringing about the death of Henry VIII by witchcraft.

The Beverley Minster Sanctuary Book has only four entries for women claiming the ancient right of sanctuary there among nearly 500 names recorded from 1478 to 1539. Ethelreda Weler from Lincoln was a felon and spinster, Elizabeth Nelson, spinster from near Goole, had committed infanticide in Hull. Elizabeth Beaumont was a

'gentilwoman' who with her relative Robert Beaumont (probably not husband as they lived in different places), admitted to the murder of Thomas Aldiray. And Margaret Johneson, whose marital status is not recorded, was taken in 'for the security of her body and limbs'. An early record of refuge for a victim of domestic abuse one wonders? Such lack of detail is tantalising but all we have.

Finally, on a more celebratory note, we have no extant verses from Beverley medieval female poets but there is the work of the prolific and 'gleefully indecent' Welsh poetess Gwerful Mechain, as shown in the British Library exhibition of 2024. This is an extract from her most famous poem entitled Ode to the Vagina:

*"Let songs to the quim grow and thrive*

*Find their due reward and survive"*

**Helen Kitson February 2026, based on a talk for the Beverley and District u3a**

**Some useful books and websites:**

<https://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/yorks/vol3> is excellent for details on the religious houses of the area and <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/yorks/east/vol6> on the townspeople and wills

<https://www.hullminsterheritage.org.uk/research/meet-our-unknown-lady-and-her-possible-identity> for the story of Agnes Bedford

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/feb/11/archive-shows-medieval-nun-faked-her-own-death-to-escape-convent> for the story of Joanna of Leeds

For Johanna Crossley read Barbara English's chapter in the *Extraordinary Women of Beverley* published by the Beverley and District Civic Society in 2019

*Medieval Women: Voices and Visions: the Book of the British Library Exhibition (2024)*  
Eds. E Jackson and J Harrison: a great read, superbly illustrated

Henrietta Leyser's *Medieval Women A Social History of Women in England 450 to 1500:* was published by Phoenix Press in 1995 and is good on everyday life

*The Lords of Holderness 1086-1260 ( 1979)* by Barbara English for the story of Hawisa Countess of Aumale

And of course Wikipedia

Thanks to Barbara English, and to Judith Georgas who took the photos at the British Library exhibition.