

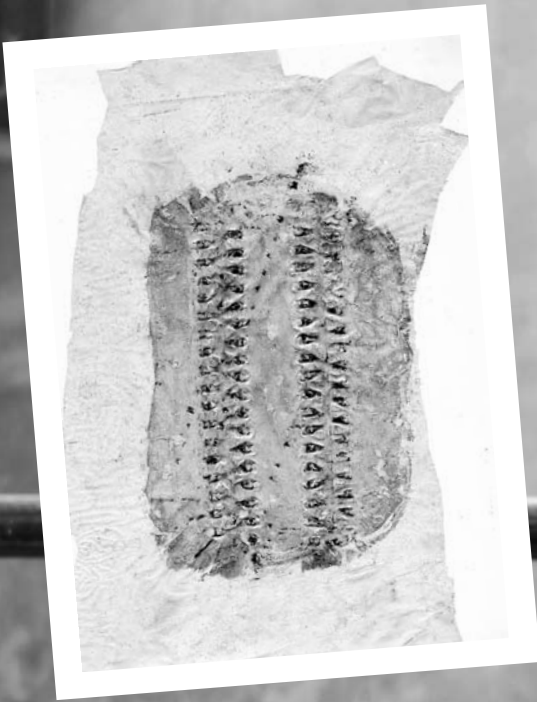
J G G U U 1 3

Ex Voto  
Extra

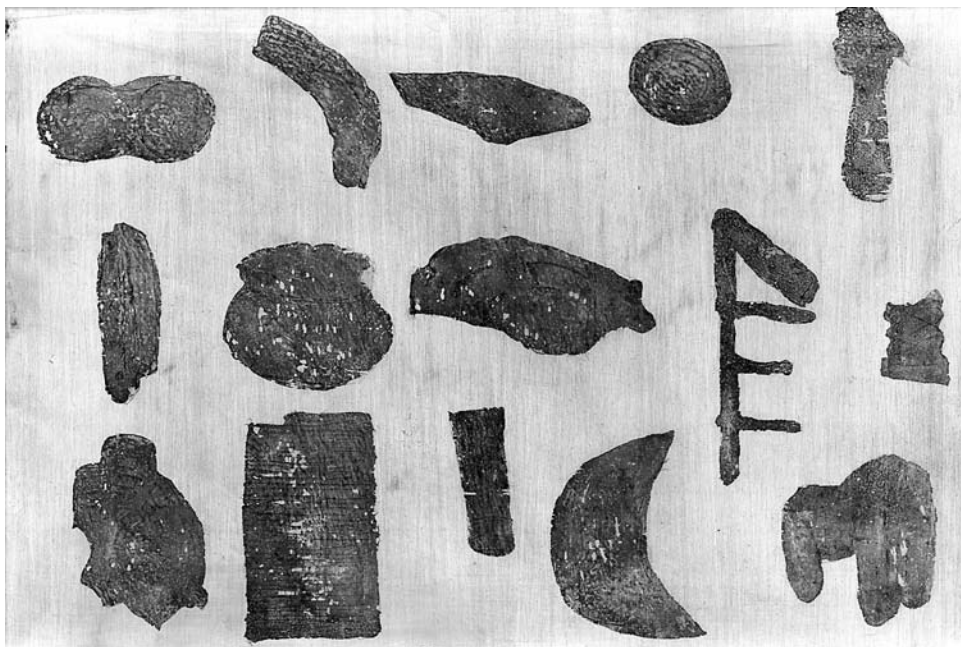
K a l e n d e r



Nicholson Gallery  
26 September-17 October  
2008







**KB:** Can you start by setting the scene, please? What sparked your interest in working with the church in Wood Dalling?

**IA:** Well, Trevor and I have often cycled past the church, as it's only three or four miles from our home. We sometimes stopped to have a look around, as we both have a thing about un-Victorianised medieval churches. St Andrew's is very evocative: full of dust, cobwebs, cracks – and light, as there's no stained glass. There's nothing grand there at all, in fact, but there are a lot of brasses and ledger slabs to named individuals. It made me feel very close to the people who were born, lived, loved and died 500 years ago.

**KB:** So you decided to use our church as the focus of an art project?

**IA:** Yes. I'd been drawn to work in what might be termed liminal places before; places like crossroads and stretches of water. I like to give time to a site, just to see what will happen. It's important that it should be a place where repeated human activity has taken place. Churches before the Reformation were repositories of magic, with their scent, chanting, colour and flickering candles. I wanted to try to tap into that; to see how far I could integrate myself into that world. The project needed a name, and I hit upon *Festial*. This was the name of a 15th century bestseller by John Mirk; a popular collection of colourful sermons for use by clergy who were not learned enough to compose their own.

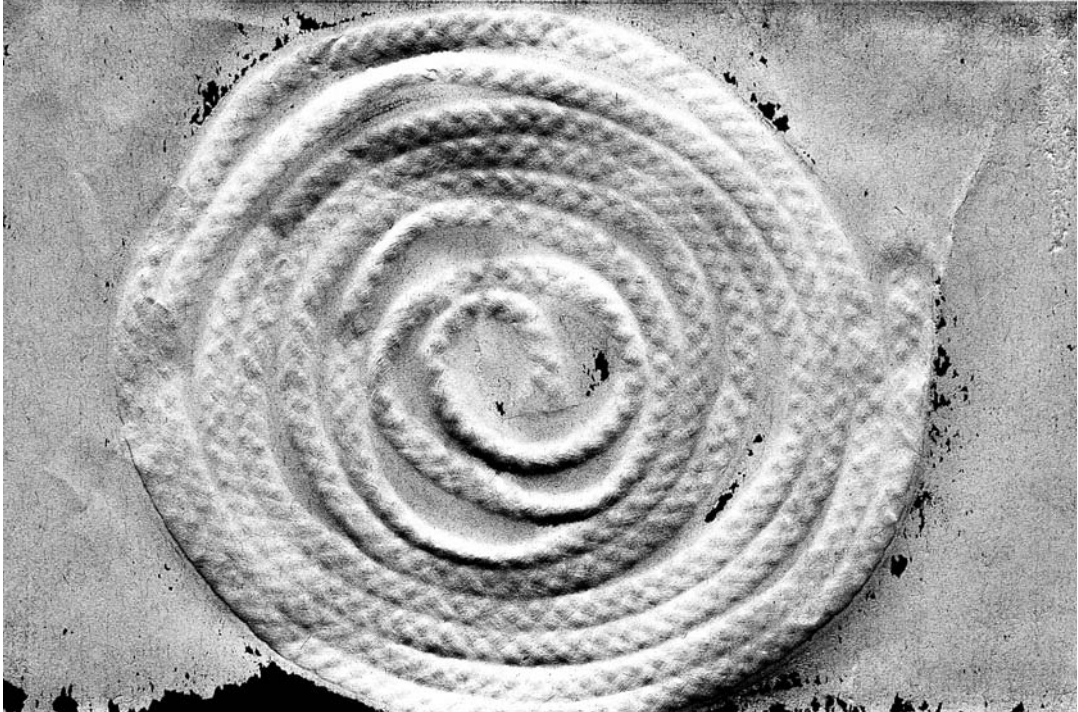
**KB: Festial! Of course! So how did you set about the project? Did you give yourself a structure to work to?**

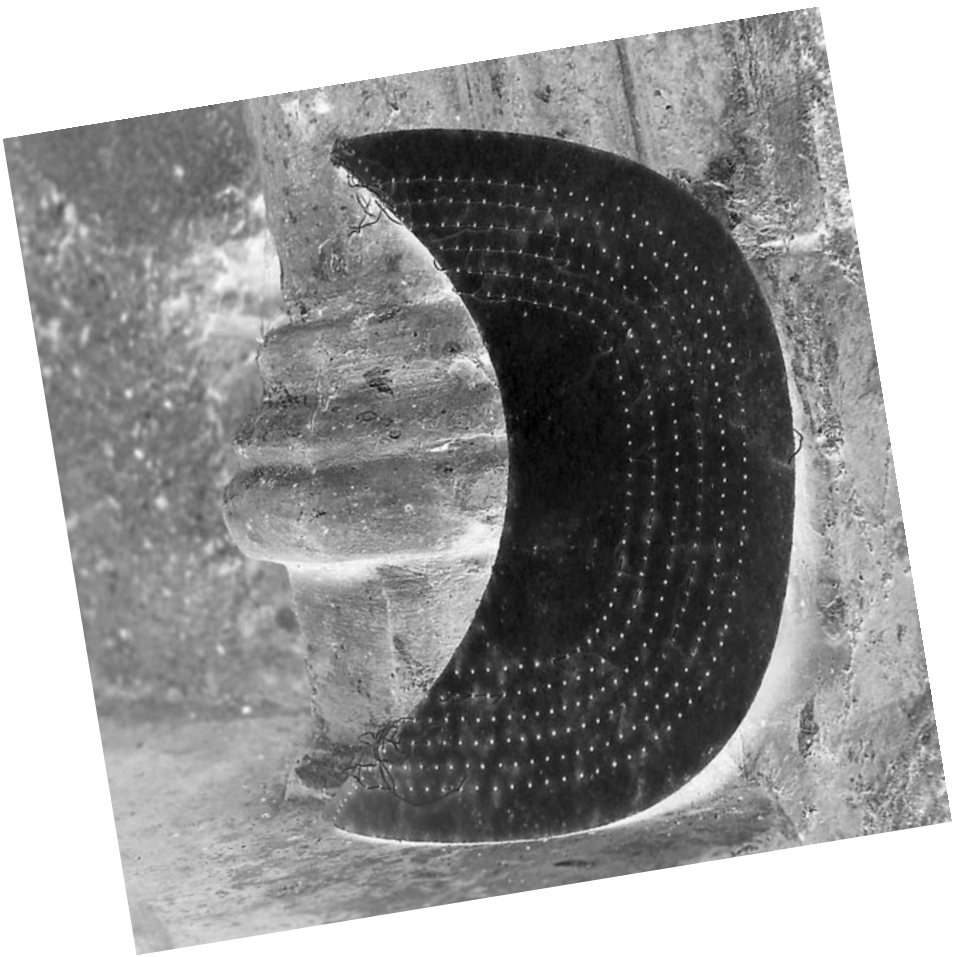
IA: I thought that the project should last for a year. I'd never focussed on one location for that length of time before. Initially my idea was to spend one day each month in the empty church – with no expectations – and to record what happened, gathering information by taking photographs, shooting video, making rubbings, drawing; anything that came to mind, really. That way I would experience the differences in the place as the year turned, and have a chance to reflect on what it might have meant to the people of pre-Reformation Wood Dalling.

**KB: But your ideas changed?**

IA: Yes. As I started planning the project, it became clear that just spending a day each month on site was too random. I'd end up going there only on the warmest, sunniest day of each month; that church strikes cold when it's cold, you know!

**KB: You can say that again!**





IA: It was Trevor who suggested choosing medieval festival dates to structure the project. At first I resisted, worrying that I'd end up with a chill at best and frostbite at worst. And no shadows to use in my photographic and video work. But then I had the idea of using the Julian Calendar to calculate the dates of the feast days, and that idea had so much appeal that after that everything fell into place.

**KB:** **Ah yes, the Julian Calendar.**

IA: Yes. It sounds as if you already know this, Katherine, but before the Reformation it was the Julian Calendar that was in use. By today's reckoning, we're now running 13 days ahead of any given date in medieval times. So, for example, my Christmas visit to St Andrew's took place on what is now 7 January.



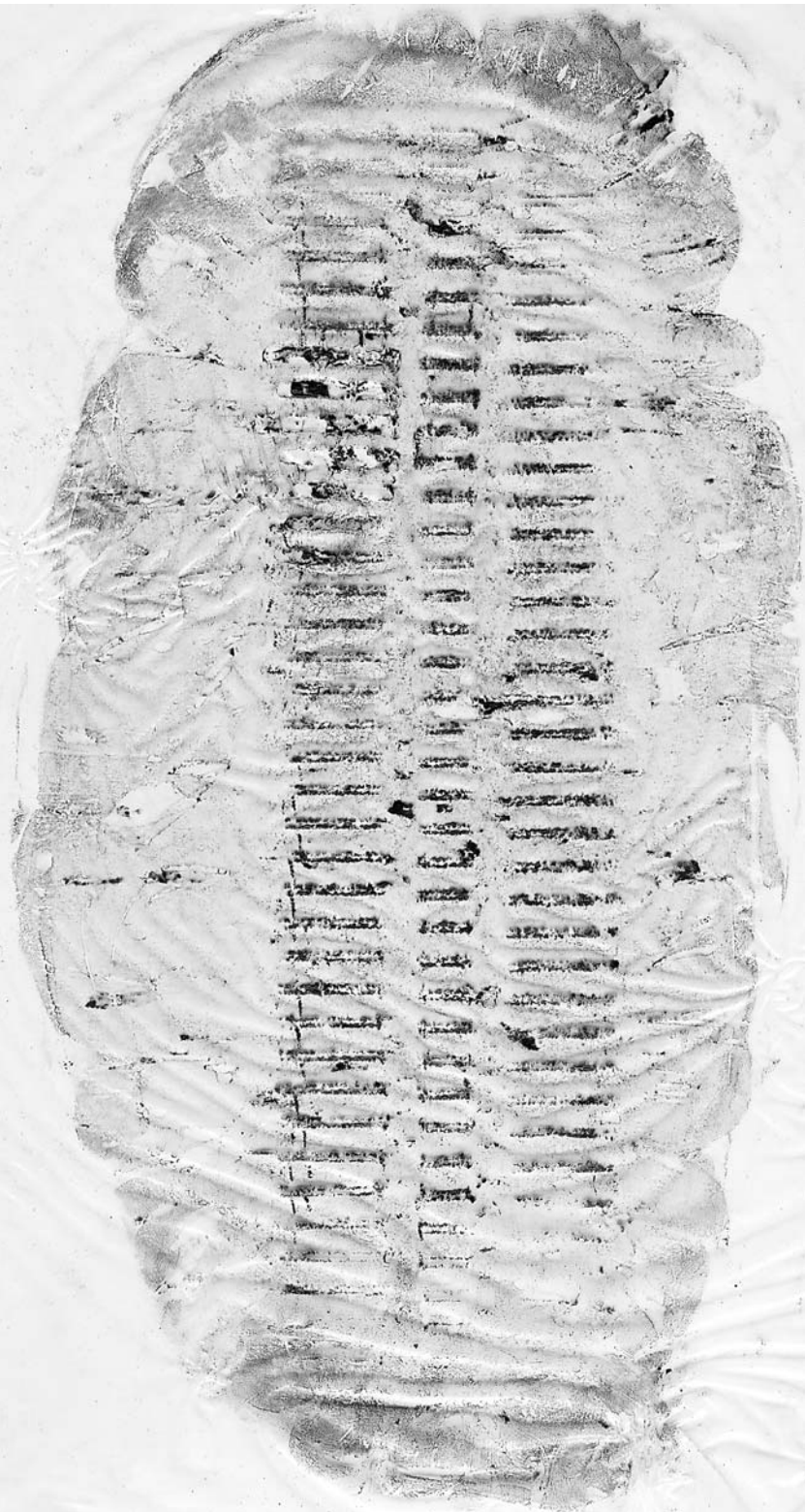
**KB:** Out of interest, what did you do to mark Christmas?

**IA:** Well, that's quite a good example of how I approached things. I'd research as widely as I could around the given festival, and then work with aspects of it, or even a stray phrase that jumped out for me. With Christmas, I was thinking both of the Feast of Fools where things were turned topsy-turvy for the duration of the festival, and also about the Christmas Eve vigil that would have taken place by candlelight up at the church. At midnight, all kinds of magical stuff was supposed to happen. For one thing, the animals would all go down on their knees and be given the power of speech.

Trevor and I were given permission to be in the church all night. I lit lots of candles and moved them around, while Trevor documented the performance using webcam and long-exposure photography. Afterwards, I wrote about the experience in stream-of-consciousness style, and that became part of the work too. We stayed in St Andrew's until midnight, with a storm crashing around the church up on its hilltop, and it was an experience I won't forget in a hurry.

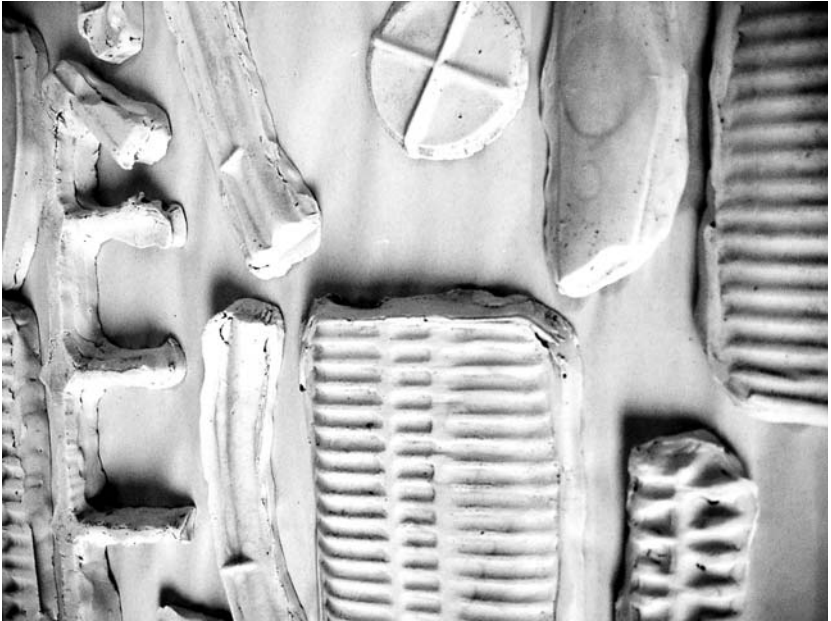






**KB: Any other highlights?**

IA: It's really hard to choose just a few things to mention. To begin and end the year, Trevor and I circumnavigated the parish of Wood Dalling on our bikes over the three days of Rogationtide, and I performed actions which we documented at each crossing point of the boundary. That was very memorable and very different both times. And jumping the midsummer bonfires, and strewing aromatic herbs in the church, and lying in the churchyard outlined in meadowsweet, and stringing elderberries among the gravestones, and making bread rolls in the shapes of strange symbols, and placing a fairycake iced with the appropriate name on each of the brasses for All Souls' Day, and circling the church with a video camera on a long pole, and ... it's no good, I'd better stop there!



**KB: How did you document all this?**

IA: There's now a huge amount of source material I can continue to work with, which is mainly in the form of photographs and video footage. But I captured the flavour of each festival as I went along by producing a giveaway multiple publication, called *Kalender*. It was intended to mimic the format of a parish magazine, and also had elements of the fanzine about it – cheaply produced, an overload of fonts and tilted black and white pictures. The *Kalender of Shepherdes* was a bestselling medieval almanac that combined religious instruction with astrology, predictions, charms, recipes and weather lore, with no apparent squeamishness. I left copies of *Kalender* in as many places as I could think of – cafes, theatres, bookshops and the like – for people to discover, pick up and take away if they were curious.

**KB: And you say that this interview is going to appear in a further issue of Kalender?**

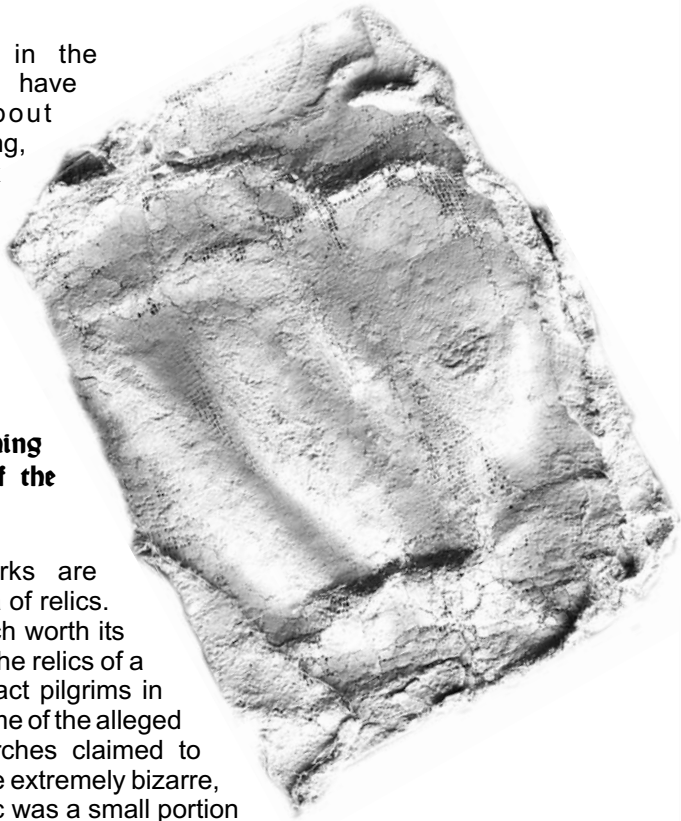
IA: Well, I've been working as Artist in Residence in the art department at Gresham's School in Holt for the past three weeks, and the residency culminates in a solo show in the Nicholson Gallery at the school. I'd really enjoyed producing the twelve editions of *Kalender* during the *Festial* year, and had the idea that if I put another one together – an 'Ex Voto Extra' – it could become the catalogue for the show, as well as documenting the process of getting to that point. The main difference with this issue is that unlike all the others there's no free gift on the cover! But it's nice to have another chance to thank all the people who have helped me on my journey.

**KB: How have you decided what to include in the show? I mean, you've already indicated that the year has left you with a huge amount of material.**



IA: It seemed impossible to take an overview of *Festial* within a single show. I started making lists, and realised that there were four main areas or themes I was interested in working with: petitioning, commemoration, protection and fertility/death.

For the exhibition in the Nicholson Gallery, I have been thinking about petitioning for healing, hence the title 'Ex Voto'. I wanted to give a sense of that delicate balance between faith, hope, gullibility, vulnerability and desperation.



**KB: Can you tell me anything about the content of the exhibition?**

IA: Several of the works are connected to the idea of relics. Every medieval church worth its salt would have held the relics of a saint, in order to attract pilgrims in search of healing. Some of the alleged body parts that churches claimed to have in their care were extremely bizarre, or sometimes the relic was a small portion of the torture equipment that had put paid to a particular saint. Not surprisingly, an aura of magic built up around the sad little remnant in its bejewelled casket, and a desperate person would risk everything to get close to it, believing that leaving an offering of money, or a vow, or a model of the body part that needed healing, would have the desired effect. And if sufferers felt that their petition to the relevant saint had been effective, they would also make a pilgrimage carrying an effigy that represented the healed body part, to leave hanging at the saint's shrine in grateful thanks. This, of course, has striking parallels in the pagan custom of leaving rags tied to trees by healing wells ... and so the imagination gets to work.

Then there are candles. Medieval churches had candles absolutely everywhere, given by people anxious to buy themselves and their ancestors a place in the life everlasting, anxious for healing for themselves and their families, anxious to be remembered. So many magical beliefs built up around candles. People with a health problem in a particular part of their body would have a candle made to the length of that part, to be burned in the church. As the wax burned away, so would their illness be cured. If the candle was very long, it would be coiled round in a spiral. That conjured up a very strong image for me.



**KB:** Do you really feel that all this is relevant to life in the 21st century? It's not exactly gritty, urban subject matter, is it?

**IA:** But I don't live in a gritty, urban environment. Working with more rural themes doesn't mean they are necessarily less hard-hitting. We all go through stuff, and I'm pretty sure that the medieval inhabitants of Wood Dalling would recognise many of our emotional problems, as we would recognise theirs, even though in many ways the medieval landscape was so strange that it stretches our 21st-century imaginations. In a broad sense, they are our ancestors; they are part of us, and we are part of them.

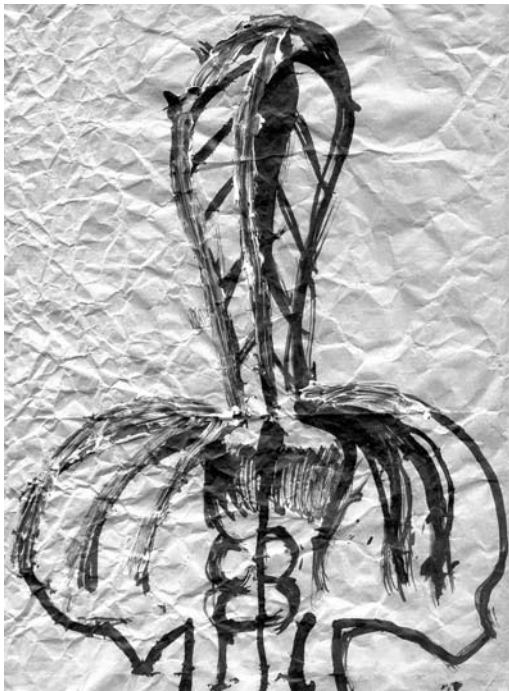
**KB: That seems like a good note on which to wind up our conversation!  
Thank you.**



*Imogen Ashwin* holds a BA (first class hon) in Fine Art and an MA in Fine Art from Norwich School of Art & Design.



*Katherine Bulwer* resides in Wood Dalling, North Norfolk. A keen patron of the arts, she bequeathed £10 towards the repainting of St Andrew's' rood screen in 1486.



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Acknowledging support from  
**Arts Council England** and  
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[www.madeincley.co.uk](http://www.madeincley.co.uk)

poppyhead painted with twig on paper bag by Alex B  
(Gresham's 4th year)



Eamon Duffy, **The Stripping of the Altars** (Yale University Press)

John Shinnars (ed.), **Medieval Popular Religion 1000-1500** (Broadview Press)

Carole Rawcliffe, **Medicine & Society in Later Medieval England** (Sutton Publishing)

**The Churchwardens and Keyholder of St Andrew's church, Wood Dalling:** with thanks for their cooperation and enthusiasm

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