ROGER SALISBURY, CURATE OF ESHER 1530S -1551

By Chris Dawson

All recent accounts state that Esher's Old St George's Church building replaced its predecessor 'around 1540', or 'in the 1540s'. A current research project focused on the period has, however, so far proved inconclusive on this date. Work on the open question is ongoing, but meanwhile an interesting by-product has emerged: i.e. a significant body of information about the life and career of Roger Salisbury, the parish priest who was incumbent at the time. Salisbury was until now only a name on a list of Esher's past curates and rectors. This is no longer the case: we don't yet have a building story, but we do have a personal one!

Roger Salisbury, or Sr ('Sir') Roger – as non-monastic priests were usually addressed – was curate of Esher throughout the ecclesiastical upheavals of the Reformation: Henry VIII's break with Rome and the establishment of the Church of England. We know that he was in post from (at latest) 1537 until his death in 1551. So was St George's rebuilt during this time, as modern accounts indicate? The current investigations have led to some questioning of this belief, first of all because the earliest mention that can be found of the 1540 date is by Salisbury's distant successor, John Kestell Floyer, in his 1911 history of St George's. Moreover Floyer cites only architectural evidence for his assertion: 'There is no record, except such that is furnished by the stones, as to when the Church was built. But the style brings it within a few years of 1540.' Floyer's words are then taken up by later local historians, who point to the details of the church plan, the roof trusses and consecration crosses, some window details, and the location of the priest's door. But none provides definitive evidence, and features such as those mentioned cannot firmly establish any precise date. So at this point it isn't possible to say anything more definite about the St George's building than 'Tudor period, 16th century'. Thinking positively, however, the renewed mystery just adds to the charm of this marvellous architectural jumble – Esher's oldest public building, and the only one that is Grade I listed.



Illustrative image of a parish priest c.1540

The hunt for evidence of the building date continues. 16th-century church records are missing, so we are forced to look elsewhere, and documents discovered so far point, if anywhere, away from the years around 1540. Most notably, thirteen wills of Esher residents from the period 1537-1551 have survived, including Roger Salisbury's own will of 1551. Several of these include small bequests to St George's – in the order of shillings rather than pounds – but they make no mention of any particular purpose, and certainly not of a major building project.

		Roger Salisbury			
Testator	**Year**	**Title**	**Role**	**Where to be Buried**	**Donations**
John Amore	1537		Witness	Churchyard	To church of Esher 6s 8d; to the high altar 4d
Thomas Jevett	1538	Curate	Witness	Churchyard	To high altar 1s
John Amoore	1539	Clerk	Witness	Churchyard	To high altar 4d
Thomas Cotyngham	1540	Priest	Witness	Churchyard	
John Frauncis	1540	Parish Priest	Overseer	Churchyard	To high altar 1s; to church box 5s
Henry Lethered	1540			Churchyard	To high altar 1d
William Hare	1544	'Ghostly Father'	Witness	Churchyard	
Thomas Wollfe	1544			Churchyard	
Thomas Deyble	1544		Witness	Churchyard	To high altar 4d
John Allen	1545	Clerk	Overseer; Witness	Churchyard	To high altar 4d
Robert Wyker	1549	Curate	Witness	Churchyard	
Robert Lorence	1550	Curate	Witness	Churchyard	
Roger Salisbury	1551			Churchyard	

List of thirteen surviving wills from Esher during Roger Salisbury's tenure

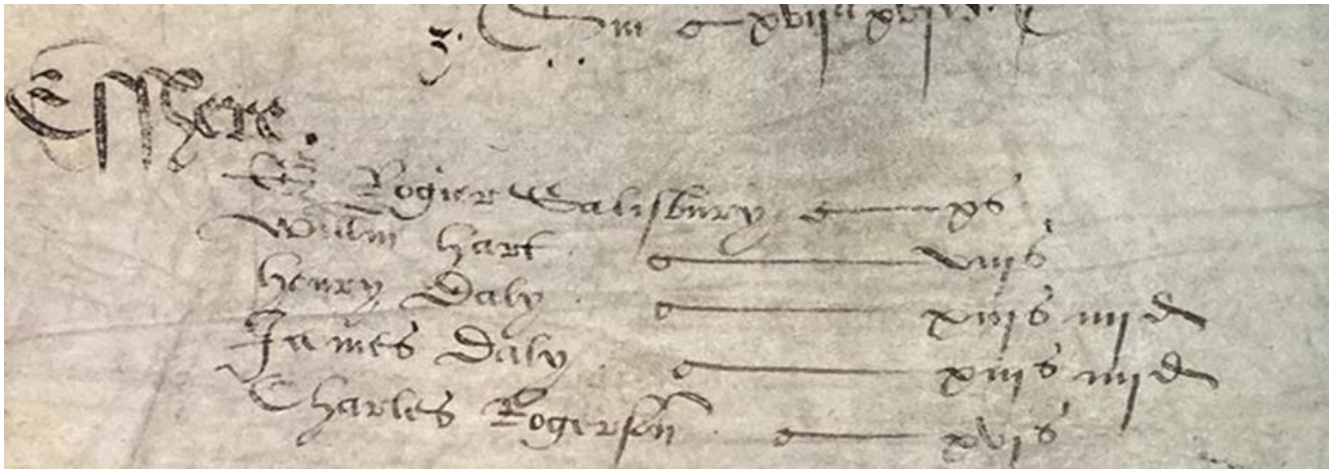
It was quite common at the time for wills to contain bequests for local church repairs. During the same period, for example, two wills from Walton-on-Thames included donations to the repair of St Mary's Church, one of them specifically for 'the repair of the great bell'. Other bequests for repairs to the churches of East and West Molesey, Thames Ditton, Long Ditton, and Cobham appear in wills in the early modern period. But there were no such bequests for Esher in Roger Salisbury's time as curate. So does this imply a church in good repair – perhaps one already rebuilt ?

Another significant contemporary phenomenon was the Hampton Court Chase – the enclosed area that Henry VIII created across most of today's Elmbridge after 1539, to satisfy his desire for an easy-to-reach hunting domain. This caused much distress for farmers on the newly enclosed land, and following repeated protests the area was 'de-chased' in 1548, under Edward VI. Life in and around the agricultural village of Esher c. 1540, at the height of the Chase period, must have been less peaceful and prosperous than it had been in the recent past, so again this prompts questions about the likelihood of a major church rebuilding project being undertaken at that time.

But returning to Roger Salisbury's story: we now know quite a lot about his life in Esher. He is listed in the 'Clergy of the Church of England' historical

database, and in the Clergy Book for the 1541 visitation of the Bishop of Winchester, part of whose purpose was to ensure that the still-applicable Catholic doctrines were being adhered to, including the conduct of the priest (there should of course be no 'Mistress Salisbury'!). The Bishop would also have reported on the state of the church building. In the same year, Sr Roger's name appeared in the List of Stipendiary Priests, where there is an interesting insight into his standard of living. Whilst many other local priests were paid by knighted patrons, he was 'paid by the parishioners', relying upon their income for his wellbeing.

A few years later, in 1545, Henry VIII requested a 'free and loving contribution' to his treasury, known as a benevolence, to help fund his military expenses in the war with France. In reality this was a compulsory tax, and Sr Roger's name appeared at the top of the list for Esher with a contribution of 10 shillings (nearly £300 in today's money).



Sr Roger Salisbury heads the list of Esher 'Benevolence' taxpayers 1545

But at around the same time a rather more intriguing event occurred, when Sr Roger became involved in a major scandal: he was accused of taking a large bribe to forge the will of a parishioner. John Francis, a self-described 'impoverished' man of Cobham, entered a Bill of Complaint that stated: 'One Roger Salisbury, Priest Curate of the Church of Esher, for the bribe of £40 (£23,000 in 2026) hath falsely and untruly forged & written a new will and testament of John Francis the father, and hath nominated [my brother] James Francis joint executor with my mother, which hath caused the utter undoing of your supplicant.' 'John Francis the father' here is the 'John Frauncis' in the list of surviving wills; the younger John's complaint is undated, but its details place it in the years between 1544 and 1547.

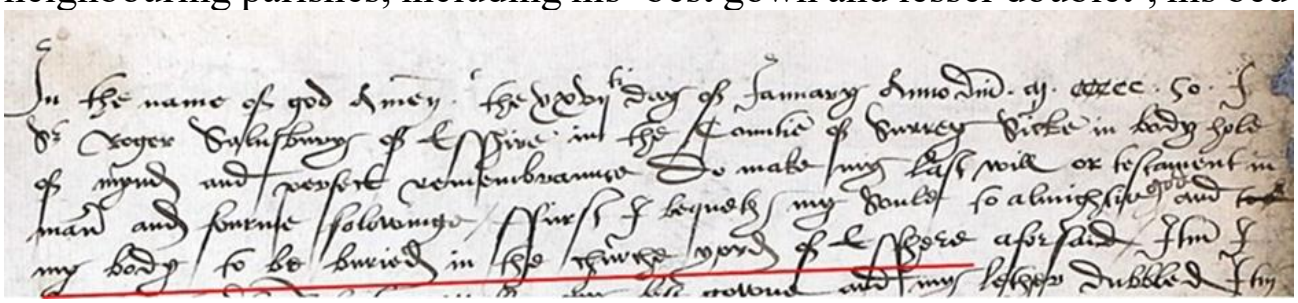
We also have James Francis's counterclaim, but unfortunately no further documents have survived from the court case. What did survive in probate records, however, was the will of John Francis senior confirming his wife and son James as executors, and leaving nothing to John junior, so this indicates that James and Sr Roger probably won the case. Also supporting

an assumption of innocence for Roger Salisbury is his continued role as curate at St George's for several more years, until his own death in 1551.

In 1549 Sr Roger had another unpleasant duty to discharge, when St George's was visited by commissioners for the boy King Edward VI, whose unscrupulous 'protectors' were pursuing aggressively Protestant policies. These were basically a pretence, intended to mask a systematic stripping of riches from churches. Under the guise of checking that the relics of Catholicism were now being taken down – a reversal of purpose since the Bishop's visit a few years earlier – a commission had been set up to catalogue the remaining popish property. This was clearly a precursor to seizing anything of value for the royal coffers, and from the commission's perspective there was some urgency, since there were rumours of church property being sold off by priests.

We still have the inventory list that was made on that day in 1549, which included such items as a silver chalice, a copper-gilt cross, and a pyx of brass, with two pewter cruets, used to store and serve the consecrated host and wine. There were two brass candlesticks, a holy water pot, and a 'censer' for burning incense. A range of textiles was recorded, some in expensive fabrics and others for everyday use, while a hand bell and the three bells in the steeple completed the inventory. But by May 1553, when the commissioners next visited, all of the valuable items had gone, with the exception of the three bells in the tower, and so of course had Roger Salisbury.

Sr Roger became sick towards the end of January 1551 and made his own will, in which he left his most valuable possessions to priests in neighbouring parishes, including his 'best gown and lesser doublet', his bed



Part of Roger Salisbury's will, with his request to be buried in the churchyard

and feather mattress, and a cupboard which contained his most precious books: *The Homilies of Haymo* (9th-century sermons on the gospel), and the *Paraphrases* of Erasmus. Other important items went to local men: his 'skeen' (a multi-use knife); a fustian doublet and hose; his 'frieze coat'; and his bows and arrows. To his women parishioners he left some well-worn clothing ('my old cloak and gown') and a list of everyday household items. He also made reference to family members in Marchwiel in Denbighshire,

where his brother and sister still lived. It may be that Sr Roger was related to the owner of Lleweni Hall, the nearby historic seat of the Salisbury family in North Wales.

Sr Roger's will also raises an interesting conundrum, since he specifically requested to be buried in the churchyard. This was highly unusual, as priests were entitled (along with local gentry) to be buried in the chancel of their own church. Likely reasons why Sr Roger may have chosen not to follow convention do not reflect positively on him: these might be extreme poverty, or public disgrace. The only obvious alternatives are practical considerations, such as a lack of space (indicative of an older church) or where the church was undergoing extensive building work. So here are yet more grounds for speculation about St George's rebuilding date, at least until more evidence appears.



Finally, after all this discussion of ancient documents, the illustration above is from 2026. ChatGPT provides an evocative sketch of how the 16th-century rebuilding project may have appeared to a passer-by.