

Christopher Urswick

St. Augustine's Tower is the remnant of the old medieval parish church of Hackney, pulled down after the "new" church of St. John was completed in 1797. The first church was built around 1275 and largely rebuilt by 1519. The main building was to the east of the Tower and wedge shaped stones in the churchyard show the footprint of the old church. The reconstruction of the church, which entailed the virtual rebuilding of the nave and chancel, was carried out at the direction of Christopher Urswick, Rector of the parish of Hackney from 1502 till his death in 1521.

The history of the Tower itself is not so clear. If you stand outside the Tower you will see that it was built in two stages. The irregular masonry at the lower level to the top of the arch is probably the original 13th century building but above there is regular masonry, Kentish Ragstone, a high class reconstruction of the Tower. It is thought that the Tower was probably rebuilt a little earlier than Urswick's reconstruction of the church but there are no records of the exact date.

The illustration below shows the church as it is thought to have looked after Urswick's reconstruction, although the clock faces shown in the illustration were added later, in the 18th century.



St Augustine's church: As remodelled by Christopher Urswick

After he became Rector, Urswick made his home in Hackney. He was buried in the old church and an elaborate monument was erected over his burial place, Urswick's monument was moved to the new church when that was completed in 1797. It has recently been restored as part of the restoration of St John's and a chapel is now devoted to his memory.



Christopher Urswick's tomb

And nearby, Urswick School commemorates his name.

Urswick had a remarkable life. He was a priest but he was also a diplomat and a courtier in the inner circle of Henry VII, England's first Tudor monarch.



Brass of Christopher Urswick in Hackney Church

Christopher Urswick's rise to prominence

Christopher Urswick was born in Furness in Cumbria in 1448. His deeply religious parents were lay members of Furness Abbey, so it is unsurprising that their son was to become a priest.

After Cambridge and ordination, Christopher came to the notice of Lady Margaret Beaufort, a descendant of Edward III's son, John of Gaunt. Margaret had been married, aged 12, to Edmund Tudor a half-brother of King Henry VI and an accepted member of the royal court.

A few months after his wedding, Edmund died leaving Margaret a thirteen year old pregnant widow. Both Margaret and her baby, Henry, survived the difficult birth but Margaret was never able to have more children, giving all her devotion to her only son. She was to marry twice more but always maintained her own separate household, including, a chaplain. And in 1482 Christopher Urswick was offered the role.



Portrait of Lady Margaret Beaufort at Prayer

In the complicated dynastic struggle known as the Wars of the Roses, the Lancastrians claimed legitimacy through descent from Edward III's son John of Gaunt. The Lancastrians were trounced by the Yorkist king Edward IV at Tewkesbury in 1471. Henry was only aged 14 at this time but due to his Lancastrian descent, he was an obvious target for King Edward and he fled to exile in Brittany. Edward reigned peacefully until his unexpected death in 1483. Henry, an obscure exile, languished in Brittany and the Yorkist dynasty seemed secure.

Scarcely had Urswick settled to his new duties when political turmoil began again and Urswick was to be in the thick of it. The new king, Edward V, was a boy of twelve. His uncle, Richard, seized power and was crowned in July 1483. Edward and his younger brother, the ill-fated Princes in the Tower, vanished.

Richard was suspected of the murder and his many enemies gravitated to Henry, still exiled in Brittany, as the favoured Lancastrian candidate for the Crown. Richard was desperate to have Henry extradited or, even better, murdered, making overtures to the Duke of Brittany to hand him over.

Margaret now began to work in secrecy towards a settlement that would make her son king. When she became aware of the danger Henry faced in Brittany, she sent Urswick on a mission of great peril to warn Henry. Henry fled from Brittany (which was then an independent country) to France accompanied by Urswick. Within a short time Urswick went from mere priest to a close confidant of a future king.

In August 1485 Henry landed in Wales with an army of French funded mercenaries, and was joined by more supporters as he marched towards the Midlands.

Urswick was with him on the campaign: priests at this time were not allowed to carry a sword, but could and often did ride with an army.

It is likely, too, that Urswick was present at the Battle of Bosworth on the day when Richard III was slain and Henry became king of England.



Priest on horseback from Ellesmere's manuscript of the Canterbury Tales



Stained glass depiction of Richard III and Henry VII at Bosworth Field. Sutton Cheney Church

Hackney in the Time of Christopher Urswick

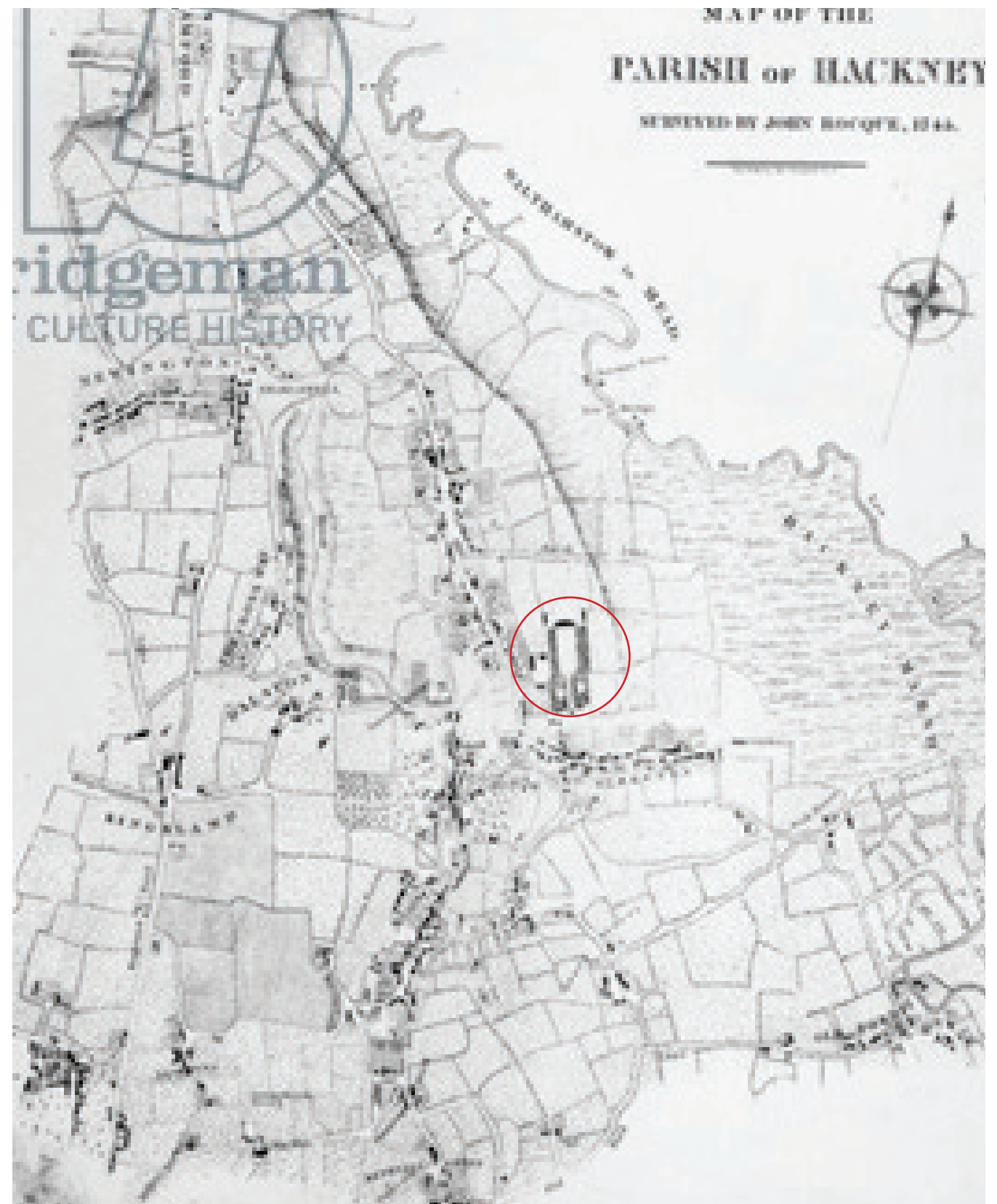
The Hackney of five hundred years ago would be unrecognisable today. The church tower, then part of a complete church, might be familiar, but not the surrounding, rather grand houses. Mare Street was there, but at times muddy, dark at night and crossed further south by Hackney Brook.



Pictorial Map of Tudor Hackney

Hackney consisted of a series of separate villages connected by paths, some of which have become the roads we know today. London, three miles away, was easily accessible down a good road. Dalston, Clapton and Homerton existed, but they remained separate hamlets into the 18th century as this map from 1745 shows.

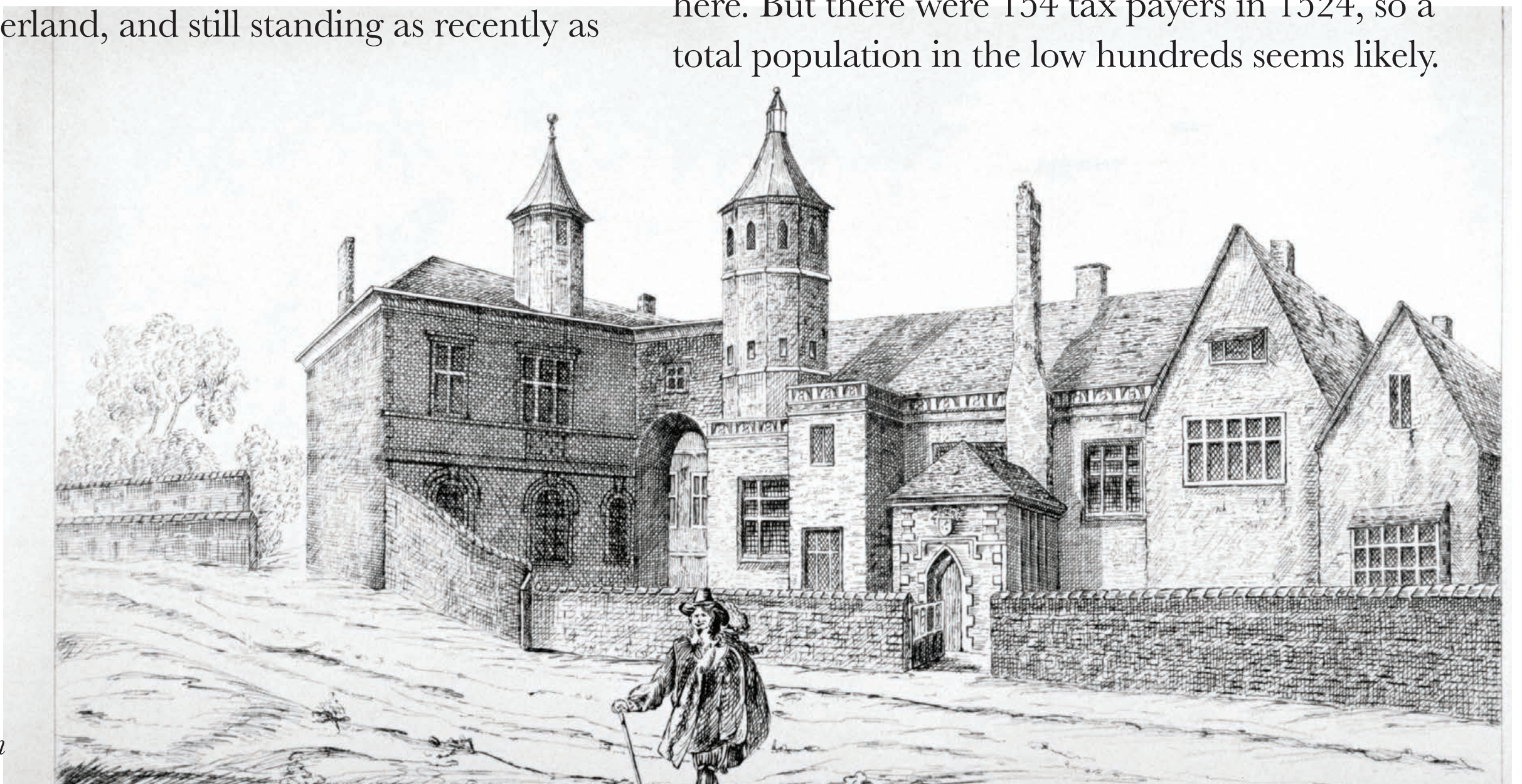
Hackney was famous for its healthy air, its good vegetables and its attractive closeness to London. By Tudor times Hackney had grown into a prosperous parish with wealthy residents. Aristocrats and courtiers were building houses in Hackney made of brick where they would have a peaceful and accessible refuge from the risks of city life. The grandest of these was Brooke House built by the Earl of Northumberland, and still standing as recently as the 1950s.



Detail of Rocque's 18th century map showing the position of Hackney Church of the Parish of Hackney

Below the rank of aristocrat, most people lived in timber-framed cottages, often with a patch of ground to raise vegetables. There were already some of the market gardens for which Hackney was to be famous, and many people were able to sell surplus produce in London.

So this was a prosperous, well ordered place. Before the days of the census return or the parish register it is impossible to know exactly how many people lived here. But there were 154 tax payers in 1524, so a total population in the low hundreds seems likely.



*Brooke House
Hackney:
As it appeared in
Tudor Times*

How Hackney worked

Life was organised around the parish. This applied to law and order, taxation, relief of poverty and even to road maintenance just as much as it applied to religious observance.

There was only one church, the Catholic Church, with the Pope in Rome at its head, his authority unquestioned. That was the theory, although by Urswick's time the seeds of questioning that were to lead to the Reformation were beginning to grow.

The church was the centre of community life and everyone was expected to go to Mass each Sunday and to attend confession. Services were conducted entirely in Latin. Children were taught the Lord's Prayer and the Hail Mary. Many churches had stained glass, carvings and wall paintings to illustrate scenes from the New Testament to reinforce faith.



Medieval stained glass: Coronation of the Virgin

Before the days of universal education, perhaps only a third of the congregation were able to read, and very few would have understood the Latin Mass.

As the Rector, Urswick was not responsible for the day to day religious needs of the parish, but was expected to pay a Vicar out of the income. This was perfectly usual at the time and there was plenty of money to go round. The living of Hackney was a prosperous one, valued at a goodly £35 per annum in 1535. The benefits also included five acres of glebe land, which could be let by the Rector, the manor of Grumbold (the area round the church) and income from annual tithes.

The law said that the Rector was entitled to a tenth of everyone's income each year, either in kind or in cash. This applied to everyone, from richest to poorest, with cottagers paying in hay or peas. As can be imagined, there were sometimes disputes and issues of non-payment.

This was a world where everyone knew everyone else, knew their business and expected their neighbours to keep their place. It is clear from court records that the benefits could include mutual support, while the disadvantages meant disapproval or ostracism for anyone who stepped outside what was regarded as the mark. In this world the advent of a new Rector, and one who was coming to live in Hackney, would have been a big event. Urswick must have been very famous very quickly.



Pieter Brueghel the Younger: The Payment of the Tithes

Christopher Urswick: Triumph and After

The new king Henry VII carried through his mother's scheme to marry Edward IV's daughter, Elizabeth of York, helping to end strife between the houses of Lancaster and York. He rewarded his friends and he also sought men who were trustworthy and able, the so called "New Men", to surround him and consolidate his rule.

*King Henry VII by
Unknown Dutch
artist*



Margaret Beaufort, had become "My lady the king's mother" signing herself "Margaret R". She remained influential for the rest of her life, walking only half a pace behind the new queen. Her effigy adorns Henry's royal chapel at Westminster Abbey where both Henry and Margaret were buried.

Christopher Urswick now left her service for that of the king, with agreement of all concerned. He was made Lord Almoner to the King, and along with this important appointment came others. The list seems endless: Dean of York, Dean of Windsor, collector of property forfeited by felons, and many other appointments besides including, from 1502, Rector of the wealthy parish of Hackney. In among all this, Urswick was often employed by Henry on foreign diplomatic missions, becoming highly regarded throughout Europe.



*Effigy of Lady Margaret
Beaufort at Westminster Abbey*

Urswick took his responsibilities seriously. At Windsor he arranged for extensive rebuilding as well as a chantry chapel, where prayers were said for his soul and that of his master, Henry VII every day until 1974. The decorative scheme is still in place – an inscription asks the reader to pray for the king, for Urswick – and, unusually, for anyone Urswick has offended in his life.



*Christopher Urswick as
depicted in the Urswick
Chantry Windsor*

Urswick's influence declined in later years possibly because he expressed opposition to King Henry appropriating clerical property to boost the royal coffers. He lived mostly in his house near to the church in Hackney dividing his time between hunting and scholarship.

Through his career Urswick built up connections with scholars all over Europe. Desiderius Erasmus and Thomas More were personal friends. Erasmus was a renowned scholar, who produced influential new translations of the New Testament, but was chronically short of money. He travelled from country to country sponging off wealthy friends and regularly outstaying his welcome. He persuaded Urswick to buy him a horse and then tried to wheedle Urswick out of the price of another when the first horse died!

Urswick evidently lived in comfort, if not luxury. In his will he refers to a sparver (bed canopy) of tawny sarcenet with intricate embroidery and black sarcenet curtains, a counterpane of verdoures, a feather mattress and down-stuffed bolsters. Urswick's bequests included 6s 8d to "the old poor man that comes to me from Kentish Town" and 3s 4d to the mother in law of one of his servants. All legatees were asked to pray for his soul.



*Desiderius Erasmus. Portrait
by Hans Holbein*

Christopher Urswick habitually added the letters MIA to his coat of arms: Misericordian, or mercy. This seems to have been appropriate to the man.

Urwick's Hackney

Christopher Urswick left an architectural legacy to Hackney.

The church itself was extensively updated. The chancel and nave may have been almost entirely rebuilt, paid for partly by Sir John Heron, partly by Urswick himself, and with the local fraternities contributing. Heron was one of the Tudor “new men” and one of the richest men in England. His seat was at Shacklewell in the parish of Hackney. He held the offices of Treasurer of the Chamber and Chamberlain of the Exchequer under Henry VII and the early years of Henry VIII.



19th century engraving of the Heron family seat in Shacklewell

The resulting church consisted of a nave with aisles, a clerestory, and a chancel, and the Tower which survives today. Heron's arms were painted between each arch in the nave, with those of Urswick in the chancel.

Urwick left instructions in his will that he should be buried in the chancel, and his tomb and brass were set up at the east end of the altar on his death in 1521.



Watercolour of the Interior of Hackney Church looking towards the chancel

To the west of the church, on the site of the old Town Hall, a parish house was built in Urswick's time, and probably at his expense. A generation later it was described as “builded by the parishioners, called the church house, that they might meet



The Church House

together and comen of matters as well for the king's business as for the church and parish, worth 20s per annum”. In 1613 James Chrycton was appointed to run a school in the building.

Urwick's own Rectory lay a short distance to the west. It is thought that Urswick modernised that house, probably adding a separate first floor,

Hackney continued to prosper and to grow and more influential “new men” built fine houses in Hackney, including Rafe Sadleir, secretary to Thomas Cromwell the enforcer of the English Reformation. Sadleir built his “Bryk Place” close by, today's Sutton House, by about 1535, a few years after Urswick's death.

Eventually, the community outgrew the old church which could seat only 800 people. After much argument, the new church of St John at Hackney, which we know today, capable of seating 2,000 souls, was completed in 1797. Many of the monuments, including Urswick's tomb, were transferred to the new church and the main part of the old church was demolished.



Depiction of Sutton House as built by Rafe Sadleir