

Stairway to Heaven: The Functions of Medieval Upper Spaces. Toby Huitson.
Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2014. xv + 264 pp. £35.

These days book titles have to grab the attention of the potential reader as vividly as possible, since so many books are published that an unmemorable title will inevitably sink the accompanying text, however good the latter may be. *Stairway to Heaven* definitely grabs; but it hints at only half the story, since much attention is paid in the book to spaces and the use of spaces that had little to do with the journey to heaven.

The book is based on the author's doctoral thesis, written for the University of Kent at Canterbury, UK, and it remains broadly based on the evidence to be found in southeast England. Many other examples are, however, given from the rest of Britain, Ireland, and the European Continent. It is a very wide survey of the different kinds of upper space that occur in medieval buildings — mostly churches — and an analysis of their possible functions. Huitson takes the discussion through to the end of Mary's reign (1553–58), for which he is to be applauded, since she reinstated, however briefly, so much traditional practice. He deals firmly with the antiquarian tradition and the factoids that have arisen from early misunderstandings. This clearing out of the metaphorical cobwebs allows him to consider the form, function, and use of upper spaces with a clear, if not always persuasive, eye.

What emerges from the accumulated evidence is the need to think about a medieval building in all its dimensions. The inclusion of galleries, triforia, and upper rooms as areas for action helps to reconcile the visual clash between the pure architecture of the upper levels, particularly in a great church, and the clutter that fills the ground floor. If the upper spaces

were in regular use for access or assisting the rite as sites for organs, candles, and draperies, the apparent purity of the architect's vision is no longer at odds with the screens, altars, liturgical furnishings, tombs, and chairs that fill the lower level. One's eyes turn upward and to all points of the compass. Choirs, actors, guardians, and ancillary staff would be moving about up there much of the time, occasionally visible, often not.

Huitson is not concerned with contemporary ideas about design in the hollowing out of upper walls. Although he rejects the notion that galleries and passages were built solely to provide access for maintenance, his account of the secret life of upper spaces is entirely practical and drawn so widely from so many sources that his presentation of the evidence, especially where it is scarce, can seem superficial. He ranges over education, dovescotes, attack and defense, sanctuary, clocks, musical instruments, masons' tracing houses, imprisonment, and sleeping, as well as libraries, treasuries, and muniments. His anxiety to gather in all high-level structures does occasionally cause a raised eyebrow: does a wooden walkway really come within the definition? Yet the effort to include all possible uses is justified by the case histories in the final chapter, where he considers the function of some individual spaces that no one has satisfactorily explained; and by being able to assess the evidence presented by each one in the light of what he has been able to analyze, he can offer some plausible suggestions of the functions of these rooms: the mysterious Old Bakery chamber in Christ Church, Canterbury, for instance, almost certainly became a watching chamber for the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket. Huitson constantly warns the reader of possible changes in function over time.

The book is fluently written and very readable. Its sheer scope, backed by copious references, makes it a useful source. Two text boxes devoted to masonic practices seem out of place, and the three other boxes, devoted to diagrams of circulation in the priories of Binham and Boxgrove and the church of St. Leonard, Hythe, are not easy to decipher, even for an architectural historian. Useful appendixes summarize some of the main functions of upper spaces.

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