The Luttrell Psalter: An Introduction for Teachers

Like most teachers, I've long been familiar with illustrations from the Luttrell Psalter without knowing much at all about the Psalter as a whole. Recently, however, I've been exploring the complete facsimile edition of the Psalter, published by the British Library in 2006. Leafing through the pages, I was on the lookout for those familiar pictures from KS3 textbooks – the farming scenes and those showing preparations for a meal where the Luttrell family and guests sit grandly at table. I found them eventually but a lot more too so thought I'd pass this on in case it's useful to teachers.

The Size andStructure of the Psalter

It's huge – and heavy! The Psalter itself consists of 309 large folios, (618 pages in modern numbering) and these folios measure 14 inches by nearly 10 inches. The scale by itself suggests the Psalter was both an ambitious concept and a lengthy and complex project to carry out.

The Psalter begins with a calendar of saints' days and other religious festivals, two whole pages for each month. In the 16th century references to the Pope and the anniversary of Becket's murder were crossed out but with such a thin line that they aren't really crossed out at all. Whoever did this seems to have been hedging his bets or disapproved of the royal edict requiring such deletions.

From folio 13 the pages are dominated by the text of the psalms and to begin with there are plenty of illustrations filling the margins all around the page and the spaces at the ends of half-lines of text. Folios 13 to 85 contain small illustrations of all kinds - numerous saints plus everyday scenes such as knife-grinders at work, a dog biting a pedlar, a patient being bled, a couple playing backgammon and many more. The story of Jesus from the appearance of the Angel Gabriel to Mary to the funeral of Mary which runs across the bottom of folios 86-99.

Then comes a change. Between folios 109 and 144 there's far fewer illustrations but they begin again from folio 145 and it's not long before those farming scenes appear across the bottoms of folios 170-173. The scenes showing the preparation of a meal and the Luttrells and guests at dinner are on folios 206-208. The people in these scenes seem so individually drawn that they are likely to include people mentioned in Sir Geoffrey's will (see below).

The most striking image, about a third of a page in height, is on folio 202v. This shows the fully-armoured Sir Geoffrey Luttrell mounted on his warhorse with his wife, Agnes, passing him his helm and his daughter in law, Beatrice, holding his shield. Above are the words 'Dominus Galfridus

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Louterell me fieri fecit' – 'The Lord Geoffrey Luttrell caused me to be made. The placement puzzled me – I would have expected it to be at the very beginning of the Psalter as a frontispiece – but it's here because it's been placed opposite the first psalm recited at Vespers each Sunday evening. This made it every bit as visible and important as a modern frontispiece.

Soon after the main image of Sir Geoffrey the illustrations end. Folios 215-298 contain only text, very plain after what's gone before. Finally, folios 298-309 contain staves of music used in services.

Some final reactions. Repeating my first thought – it's huge! Those famous farming scenes appear on just 4 of the 309 folios, a tiny proportion of the whole. And the scale of the project is deeply impressive – the planning, care and overall discipline that went into the creation of the Psalter was immense. I'm also rather jealous of the artistic abilities of those who created the Psalter – so often we adopt a 'deficit model' when thinking about the Middle Ages, comparing medieval art with works by the very greatest artists of other times but the Psalter has to be seen in its own right – so many of these pages are, quite simply, beautiful.

Folios, verso and recto – books on the Psalter and major websites identify the contents by folio number and then either v or r – v for verso and r for recto. If you have the Psalter open or you look at an opening on the BL website the Verso is on the left and the Recto is on the right. Recto/Right is the easiest way to remember it. I've used v or r references in case you want to look any up.

Who were the Luttrells?

Four members of the family are important in the story of the Psalter in the fourteenth century – Sir Geoffrey and his wife Agnes, their eldest surviving son, Andrew and his first wife, Beatrice. Geoffrey was born in 1276 in Irnham, Lincolnshire, the village at the centre of his life where he was later married and buried. In terms of status the Luttrells have been described as 'minor baronage' though only Robert, Lord Luttrell (d.1297) was summoned individually to Parliament and was thus the only member of the family to rank as a peer. Sir Geoffrey Luttrell seems more suited to being described as a member of the gentry.

Sir Geoffrey wasn't a prominent figure in national politics. As a soldier, he was summoned to take part in a dozen campaigns between 1297 and 1319 against the Scots but otherwise seems to have spent his life focussing on managing his estates – he also held the manor of Hooton Pagnell in south Yorkshire and smaller estates in Nottinghamshire and Leicestershire. His most notable appearance in the records was when he joined in a raid to seize goods from the local abbey of Sempringham.

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This raid appears linked to local disputes over property but also to the much wider controversies surrounding Edward II's kingship. Luttrell sympathised with and broadly supported Thomas, earl of Lancaster, King Edward's leading opponent. An illustration in the Psalter shows an execution, which historian Joyce Coleman has convincingly argued to be that of Lancaster at Pontefract in 1322 (later there were attempts to canonise Lancaster and pilgrims visited sites linked to his life).

In her article '*New evidence about Sir Geoffrey Luttrell's raid on Sempringham Priory, 1312*' Joyce Coleman says:

> 'The research presented here paints a portrait of an adept survivor. From 1312 (the Sempringham raid) through the date of the Psalter's creation, Sir Geoffrey Luttrell nursed a secret admiration for the arch-rebel Thomas of Lancaster - while yet managing, unlike John Giffard and Roger de Birthorpe, to keep himself alive and his manors intact. As Janet Backhouse notes, Luttrell's overriding goal throughout Edward II's turbulent reign was 'to safeguard his family and estates'." In this aim he succeeded admirably, surviving with the means and the drive to commission his famous Psalter.'

In 1297, when he was 21, Geoffrey married Agnes Sutton, their marriage lasting over forty years until Agnes died In 1340, aged about 57. Sir Geoffrey died in 1345, aged 69. They must have felt they'd lived in a harsh and dangerous period, notably the Great Famine and deaths by starvation of 1315-1318 and the political dramas which led to Edward II's deposition in 1327, though from our perspective those events seem less significant because we know that the Black Death lay around the corner.

Geoffrey and Agnes had six children, of whom Andrew, born in 1313, was their heir. Andrew married Beatrice le Scrope, a very advantageous marriage as Beatrice's father was a wealthy lawyer, one of the leading judges in the country and ultimately Lord Chief Justice of the King's Bench. Luttrell pride in its connections by marriage is reflected in the inclusion in the Psalter of the coats of arms of the Luttrells, Suttons and le Scropes.

Andrew followed in his father's military footsteps, fighting in Edward III's wars against France but he and Beatrice never had children. This may have been the reason Beatrice went on pilgrimage abroad in 1350, perhaps to Spain. Beatrice died by 1363, the year when Andrew married his second wife, Hawisia who was aged 18. Their son was born soon afterwards. Andrew died in 1390 aged 77 - the brass to his memory can still be seen in Irnham church.

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When, how and why was the Psalter created?

As you'd expect, there is much debate and disagreement amongst historians about the answers to the questions in the heading above. All I'm aiming to do here is to set out the major arguments:

When was the Psalter created? – It was begun and mostly created between c1325 and c1345 but was unfinished at Geoffrey's death in 1345, hence the possibility of a final section (folios 215ff) being completed cheaply in the 1360s.

How was it planned and who created it? It was planned by Geoffrey and by at least one cleric, perhaps one of his chaplains or his confessor. Their planning of the details was highly intricate, the illustrations being carefully chosen to link to the text and bring out the meaning of the text. The words were written by a single scribe but six artists contributed the illustrations over time, one of whom knew the family well or came to stay at Irnham (suggested by the quality of the likenesses of individuals). The artists may have come from the local monastic houses of Stamford and Bourne but historians have also suggested the involvement of artists from religious houses at Lincoln, Norwich or York.

Why was it created? The timing of the initial commissioning may have been prompted by receiving the papal dispensation for the marriage of Geoffrey and Agnes in 1331, long after they'd married but indicative of concern over the security of their son Andrew's inheritance, or by the 1334 coming of age of Andrew. However the core motives behind the commissioning lie in a complex mix of religious belief and anxiety about the a world seemingly in chaos.

The centrality of religion in the Psalter (not just the psalms but the illustrations) suggests Geoffrey may have been particularly concerned for his soul and his place in Heaven, perhaps unusually so. The many 'monstrous' images of creatures, part-men, part-animals, are a warning of the horrors awaiting in Hell but also, as Michelle P Brown writes in *The World of the Luttrell Psalter* (2006):

> [their] 'primary function may have been to symbolize the world turned upside down – the bizarre and the unexpected – and the forces of anarchy held at bay only by prayer and adherence to the law of God and of his earthly vice-gerents: the king, or the local lord – Sir Geoffrey. They reflect the neuroses of a society in flux, one rightly concerned in the face of political corruption, international warfare, civil war, famine and demographic decline.

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Similarly, Richard K Emmerson and PJP Goldberg argue in their article ‘’The Lord Geoffrey had me made’: Lordship and Labour in the Luttrell Psalter’ that one purpose of the Psalter was to display an idealised version of society – one where there was order, where Sir Geoffrey was the ideal Christian knight and the father of his community, where everyone carried out the roles ordained for them to God and did not challenge the nature of society. This suggests that even before the Black Death there was real worry about social instability, the mobility and fluidity of society being seen as threatening everyone’s welfare. Thus the illustrations of peasants at work were not intended to be realistic but to show an idealised picture of the role of the peasants in the village.

Sir Geoffrey’s Will and the People in the Psalter

The other major document associated with Sir Geoffrey is his will which has been described as one of the most generous religious bequests of the period. I can’t find an easily-accessible version of the will but years ago I did take notes from the one place I have found it – a 1932 edition of the Psalter edited by E.G. Miller.

Note: a mark was worth 13 shillings and four pence – two-thirds of a pound. The best guide to the value of the sums below is that £20 was the revenue from each of his major manors at Irnham and Hooton Pagnall – this shows just how huge a sum was given for distribution to the poor. £20 was also around the cost of the Psalter itself.

Here are some of the major items:

500 marks (£333) for 20 chaplains to recite masses for Sir Geoffrey for five years

£200 for distribution to the poor on the day of his burial and on his week and month’s mind (7th and 30th days after his burial)

£20 for distribution to the poor on the anniversary of his death

£20 for candles around his body at the funeral - each candle a ‘living prayer’ hence the huge sum

40 shillings for clerks to recite psalms at the funeral

Each mourner to receive one penny and a share of the banquet

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20 quarters of wheat and 40 quarters of malt for ale for a gathering of friends

£20 for wine, food, spices etc for the gathering of friends

5 marks for the fabric of Irnham parish church and to each of the churches on his other estates; money to Lincoln cathedral, St. Paul's, York Minster, Canterbury cathedral and other religious sites including a number of abbeys in the region.

His war horse and its trappings were also given to Irnham church –in Michelle P Brown's words 'the equivalent of leaving the parish priest your Ferrari'.

In addition to bequests to his children Sir Geoffrey also made numerous bequests to his servants including household items for which they'd been responsible:

40 shillings and the contents of the bedchamber to Joan of Meaux, the family's lady's maid

20 shillings to Sir Robert, his chaplain

5 marks to his confessor, William of Fotheringhay

50 marks to Thomas of Chaworth, his squire

5 marks plus the utensils in the pantry and buttery to John the butler

5 marks plus the brass and wooden vessels in the kitchen to John the cook

5 marks plus the soft furnishings in the hall to William the porter

5 marks to each of the following – Alice (chambermaid), John (clerk), William (chamberlain), John (servant), William and Robert (kitchen servants) and Robert (reeve).

He also left 5 marks to each of three godsons, all children of his servants.

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How can the Psalter help KS3 students understand the Middle Ages?

The illustrations have been used for many decades to accompany descriptions of life and work in the 14th century. Valuable though this is, the Psalter and will can be used in more constructive ways too:

1. What can you learn from …

Most obviously students can be asked to suggest what can be learned from these sources, a good way of exploring what can be learned directly and what can be inferred and to practice using provisional language about what the material 'might suggest' etc.

2. What mattered to the Luttrell family?

Material from Geoffrey's will and the Psalter can be used to identify the following:

- the centrality of religion and concern for individuals' souls after death

- the importance of family and of passing property and status onto future generations

- 'worship' – what we would call having the respect of other people. Geoffrey was clearly proud of his military career and his service to Edward I and the crown in general.

- a sense of community, most obvious in Geoffrey's will

- the importance of social order and stability and the consequent fear of change bringing disorder.

This is the approach taken in Chapter 3 of my online Y7 textbook on the Middle Ages available at:

https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/Medieval/MAResources.html

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Websites, Resources and Further Reading

The British Library: the home of the Psalter

A small selection of images, including some of the best known pages.

https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/the-luttrell-psalter

A digitised version of the whole Psalter – you can go direct to individual folios using the folio references top right of the page.

http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=add_ms_42130_fs001ar

A selection of 32 pages with descriptions of the content

https://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/ttp/luttrell/accessible/introduction.html#content

Books

Michelle P. Brown, *The World of the Luttrell Psalter*, The British Library, 2006. (96 pages)

The most up-to-date and thorough survey, written by the editor of the facsimile edition.

Janet Backhouse, *The Luttrell Psalter*, The British Library, 1989 (64 pages)

Brief, very well illustrated survey. Out of print but available second-hand

Janet Backhouse, *Medieval Rural Life in the Luttrell Psalter*, British Library, 2000 (64 pages)

Discussion of the evidence in the Psalter for rural life, linking text to the detail in the many illustrations.

Sheila Sancha, *The Luttrell Village*, 1982 (black and white, 64 pages)

For children and intelligent adults - a beautifully illustrated (in black and white) account of the Luttrells and life in the village of Irnham. Widely available for one penny plus postage – amazing value for a delightful book.

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Chris Given-Wilson, *Edward II: The Terrors of Kingship*, Penguin, 2016

This short (127pp) book in the Penguin British Monarchs series is the best introduction to the reign of Edward II, providing context for Luttrell's likely support for Thomas of Lancaster.

Michelle P Brown, A facsimile edition of the Psalter was published by the British Library in 2006 with an editorial commentary (60 pages long) by Michelle P Brown. A further edition of this facsimile was also published by The Folio Society. Second-hand copies are available – the cheapest I've seen was £875.

The Luttrell Psalter film

A 20 minute film made by re-enactors bringing scenes in the Psalter to life. No words, just music. I can't recommend this highly enough.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=myRNKk0-63A

The film is also at

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O0AnUM1tt54

There is a blog explaining some of the features of the film at:

https://luttrellpsalter.wordpress.com/

Other Resources

Facsimile Film: 80 seconds providing a visual introduction to the Psalter, using the facsimile edition

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gc4UiOeVaW8

Medieval pottery - a modern potter demonstrates how pottery in the Psalter would have been made

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HAaJM5RekLs

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Joyce Coleman, '*New evidence about Sir Geoffrey Luttrell's raid on Sempringham Priory, 1312*'

British Library Journal, vol 25, 1999

https://www.bl.uk/eblj/1999articles/article7.html

Richard K Emmerson and PJP Goldberg, ''*The Lord Geoffrey had me made': Lordship and Labour in the Luttrell Psalter*' in JS Bothwell et al (eds), *The Problem of Labour in Fourteenth-Century England*, 2000.

Available via the academia.edu website

Lost in Time: a KS3 textbook

Back in 2000 I wrote a book for Y7 hoping that students, just out of primary school, would enjoy reading it rather than 'just' using it. The book was *Lost in Time*, in which a class of Y7s, returning from a visit to Ancient Rome in their school's rickety time machine, landed in the 14th century where they met Sir Geoffrey Luttrell and his family, then visited the 1660s, being shown round by Sam and Elizabeth Pepys, and finally Victorian England where Flora Thompson showed them village life in Candleford and took them on a trip to London. These 'visits' plus oral history research on life in the 20th century were intended to give Y7s an overview of social changes across time.

Of course, hardly anyone bought *Lost in Time*! It was too different from normal textbooks and too adventurous in approach to be given to non-specialists filling in with KS3. But I had a great time writing it, especially when Sir Geoffrey stowed away in the time machine and asked Sam and Flora leading questions about changes and continuities! Happily, feedback suggested that the pupils who did use it had as good a time as I did!

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