Exploring History: Medieval to Modern 1400 – 1900
Beauchamp's Chapel

Narrator
At first sight, the Beauchamp Chapel looks static, but Richard Beauchamp made provision in his will for three masses to be sung every day for his soul.

And at these times, the chapel was full of movement. Priests would have chanted the mass and the air would have been thick with incense. Above all, the imagery used on the tomb in the surviving stained glass and the sculptures, link Beauchamp into a cosmic struggle for redemption.

Those visiting the chapel understood this language of symbols.

Beauchamp himself takes centre stage, at the moment he leaves earthly life. The tomb shows him in a funeral car, or hearse, as if he's being taken to burial. This effigy, or image, of the earl, would only be seen when mass was being said. At other times it was covered by a cloth. Beauchamp is depicted in his youthful prime and not a man of 57, the age at which he died.

Richard's eyes are open. He seems to gaze at God on the ceiling above, a reminder that his salvation depends on God's mercy.

Directly above Beauchamp's tomb is the Virgin Mary. Mary played a crucial role in Western Medieval Christianity, in interceding for humanity with her son, Jesus, and with God the divine father. Mary's importance to Richard is also seen in his will. He ordered an image of Mary in pure gold to be given to his Chantry Chapel, though this hasn't survived.

Mary is not looking at Beauchamp but at the west wall of the chapel where originally another dramatic scene was depicted, the last judgement of souls at the end of the world. The medieval scene was over-painted in the 17th century with the scene we see today. The original may have resembled another 15th century painting of the last judgement, or doom, which still survives in the Church of the Holy Trinity in Coventry, not far from Warwick.

The decoration in the chapel represents the celestial hierarchy.

Angels holding instruments and sheet music encircle the chapel in the stained glass.

Angels and saints are depicted in the design of the east window. Stone sculptures of St Catherine, St Barbara, and angels, frame the stained glass window, with God at the apex.

In the stained glass, images of Richard's favourite saints are still intact. St Thomas à Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, martyred in the 12th century.

St Winifred. And St Alban, the first English Christian martyr, wearing a ceremonial cap denoting his rank. Other saints include St John of Bridlington in priests' vestments. His cult was popular at the Lancastrian court.

Richard provided in his will for gold statues of himself to be sent to the shrines of these saints, like votive offerings to attract their intercession on his behalf.

The window originally featured Richard and his family. At some stage the glass was damaged, and mistakes were made when it was restored in the 18th century. Richard's figure can be identified by his coat of arms, but his head has been replaced by that of one of his wives or daughters. The mourners, or weepers, around Richard's tomb, portray his relatives,

holding rosaries, scrolls or prayer books. These, and images of his family in the stained glass window, are reminders of the earthly existence Richard had left behind him.
The tomb and chapel serve as permanent reminders of the duty of the Chantry priests and the Beauchamp family to pray for his soul.

Those visiting the chapel would have understood the special conventions and language of heraldry. Heraldry was a shorthand which identified a person's rank, family, ancestry and entitlement to lands. Heraldic symbols include the bear, griffin, swan on the coats of arms which adored the chapel. All of these would have held a meaning for the medieval visitor.

The chapel was meant to show the two dimensions of Richard Beauchamp, as mighty nobleman and as Christian soul.

Heraldry in the chapel emphasised his earthly status, the weepers and the doom, the figures of Mary, and the interceding saints, reinforce his need for assistance.