

## Confraternity Letter from William Goddard to William Bowland, Prior of Tandridge, and his Brethren

In Latin, illuminated document on parchment

England (London), September 16, 1479

*One sheet of parchment, written in a formal English Gothic bookhand in thirteen long lines, ruled in light brown ink (justification 80 x 255 mm.), opening with a three-line gold initial, heavily outlined in black, on a spiky ground of light pink, infilled with blue with gold tracery, with vines sprouting from the initial to form a border in the top and left margins with small green leaves and gold blooms, abrasion, stains, and darkening across surface but no text lost, original hole in lower right corner, bottom 30 mm. folded towards recto, two slits through center of the folded bottom through which wax seals would have been attached, but it is unclear if they were ever added, once glued to a cardboard (traces remain on verso). Dimensions c. 197 x 337 mm. as is, with fold.*

Illuminated documents – indulgences, diplomas, charters, contracts, marriage certificates – are exceptions in the field of diplomatics. This visually striking sheet, a letter of confraternity, belongs to the category of indulgences. Specifically, it permits the Augustinians of Tandridge Priory to share (for a fee) an important papal indulgence related to confession granted to the Franciscans. The importance of this transaction is underlined by the careful script and illumination by professional artists in London in 1479, setting this document apart from others that were mass produced.

### PROVENANCE

1. Written and illuminated in London by professional scribe scribes and artists on behalf of William Goddard, Minister Provincial of the Franciscan Order for England, dated September 16, 1479. William Goddard (known as the elder of that name) was the most prominent English Franciscan of his time. It is addressed to William Bowland, Prior of Tandridge, an Augustinian priory at Tandridge, in Surrey, South East England.

Tandridge Priory was founded as a hospice around 1200 and became a house of Austin Canons sometime shortly thereafter. This document identifies, for the first time, the surname of William Bowland, Prior of Tandridge; until now, he has been recorded among the list of Tandridge priors only by his first name (Heales, 1885, pp. 41, 94; Malden, 1967, § 29; Smith, 2008, p. 530).

### TEXT

“Venerabili domino Willelmo Bowland priori monasterii Tanrygge ... frater Willelmus fratrum minorum in Anglia minister et servus ... dominus Sixtus divina providencia papa quartus ... ad nostrum habitis ordinem considerans et acceptans vos in confratres et ad uniusa et singular fratrem ... Datum London xvi die mensis Septembris Anno domini Millesimo Quadringentesimo Septuagesimo nono.”

Letter addressed to William Bowland, Prior of Tandridge Priory, and his brethren, from William [Goddard], Minister Provincial of the Friars Minor for England. Goddard outlines that Pope Sixtus IV (r. 1471-1484) granted to the Franciscans, and their *confratres* and *consorores*, the right to choose their own confessor to absolve them of all sins, for both the year following 4 April 1479 and at the moment of their death. Goddard, on behalf of the Franciscan Order, here accepts the

community of Tandridge Priory as his own brethren, allowing them to likewise benefit from this privilege. The closing of the letter records that it was written in London on 16 September 1479. A letter like the letter of Confraternity described here, also dated 1479, from the Franciscans of Bridgewater to John Kendale and his family has been translated (Swanson, 1993, p. 211).

## ILLUSTRATION

The illuminated initial is distinguished by the very striking border of densely drawn hairlines (feathering), all terminating in small green ovals, which springs forth from the initial and continues in the upper and inner margins of the document. The style may be compared with a Middle English manuscript (Alain Chartier, *Le quadrilogue invectif*, and other texts), Oxford, University College, MS 85, c. 1450-1475, probably London (Scott, 1996, cat 118, ill. 437 and 439), by an artist who decorated the borders in at least nineteen other manuscripts, including copies of Statutes, Genealogical Chronicles, and other texts.

Anxiety about the afterlife in the later Middle Ages fueled a commodification of spiritual benefits or privileges, many of which lessened the time one must endure Purgatory. These "indulgences" could be earned through acts of faith, such as penance or pilgrimage, or in exchange for donations to the Church. Confraternity was a popular form of shared indulgence: through a declaration of brotherhood from a religious house or order an individual or group could claim the same benefits they enjoyed. Indulgences in late medieval culture, once thought of only in negative terms (influenced by criticisms levelled at the doctrine in works such as Chaucer's *Pardoners Tale*, and by Martin Luther and others), have been re-evaluated and seen in a more positive and nuanced light in recent scholarly studies (Swanson, 2007; Rudy, 2017).

Confraternity letters first began to appear in England around 1300 (Little, 1956, p. 14). Many fifteenth-century confraternity letters written (or printed) in England were produced *en masse*, with the beneficiary and date left blank to be filled in upon purchase (Swanson, 2000, p. 43). This document, however, with its careful script and illumination stands apart from these "mass-produced" documents and was written specifically for William Bowland and the members of his priory (on potential means of contracting and paying for confraternity, see Swanson, 2000, pp. 44-48). Franciscan letters of confraternity are especially abundant from 1479: more letters from this year survive than from any other (Clark-Maxwell, 1926). They respond to an indulgence issued by Pope Sixtus IV which granted to all Franciscans, as well as the *confratres* and *consorores* holding a letter such as this one, the privilege to choose their own confessor for a plenary absolution (that is, the absolution of *all* sins) once in the year following 4 April 1479, and also at the time of their death. Sixtus IV was himself a Franciscan, and this indulgence was an excellent (and well-exploited) way for the Order to raise funds (Little 1956, p. 16; Swanson 2002, pp. 134-35 and 2007, p. 145).

Examples of late medieval confraternity letters can be found in many English archives and private collections; over 330, mostly in the United Kingdom, are accounted for by Clark-Maxwell (1926 and 1929) and Little (1956). Only a very few decorated examples have been noted in published sources (an elaborately illuminated example was made for the future King Henry VIII by Hounslow in 1508; London, BL, Stowe Ch 617, Online Resources; one copied in a formal script with an elaborate penwork initial reproduced in Clark-Maxwell, 1929, pl. lxxvi; see also Swanson, 2000, pp. 43 and 55).

The illuminated Letter of Confraternity described here should be seen in the context of other examples of illuminated documents, including diplomas, charters upon rights of arms, and marriage certificates. Illuminated documents stand apart from most documentary material – they are always the exception rather than the rule – and prompt historians to examine closely the reasons behind their production.

## LITERATURE

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## ONLINE RESOURCES

London, British Library, Stowe Ch 617, Letter of Confraternity from Hounslow to Henry VIII, 1508

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Letter\\_of\\_confraternity,\\_1508\\_-\\_BL\\_Stowe\\_Ch\\_617.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Letter_of_confraternity,_1508_-_BL_Stowe_Ch_617.jpg)

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