

On the Passing of a Friend — a tribute to Chris Pickvance

Friendship is a very strange thing, especially, I am learning, the older you get in life. One moment you're shaking hands with someone for the first time over coffee; the next, you're looking forward to their calls and missing their absence. If these past two years have taught me anything, it is to be grateful. I am chiefly grateful, then, to have called Chris Pickvance a friend. A retired professor emeritus from the University, we met after I cold-emailed him upon finding a suite of excellent articles he had written on specific medieval chest types in Kent. For my part, I was immensely relieved to have found a kindred furniture-spirit so close to home, and I think he felt some degree of sympathy for the frazzled, stressed-out graduate student who was eager to chew through a good typology or two.

That was in the spring of 2018. The doors that Chris opened for me were many, and varied, and drastically altered the trajectory of not only my doctoral studies but my life these past three years (and counting). These were the hopeful verdigris doors of Siena Cathedral. The towering tripartite portals of Chartres. Through them, and less than two months after first meeting Chris, I was having coffee with another mentor I've been lucky to have these past three years, a certain curator at the V&A, in said museum's beautiful inner courtyard, in a (terrifically nervous on my part) conversation that would soon lead to many, many months spent working at the museum when time and money allowed me the privilege. In the summers of 2018 and 2019, Chris and I drove around Kent, visiting many medieval chests (several of which now feature prominently in my thesis), in beautiful and lonely locations that would have been otherwise impossible for me to reach. I remember driving across the grazing marshes on the Isle of Sheppey, making for the parish church at Harty, while Harris's hawks wheeled overhead and a storm started blowing in from the Channel. It was a cloudy day with amazing, radiant breaks in the threateningly bruised-blue sky. It was a great day. The first time I saw my name printed in an academic article was in Chris's acknowledgements for that trip.

Fast forward to March, 2020. Chris and I had been getting coffee fairly regularly, at least a couple times a month. We'd meet on campus and I'd waffle on the current section of material culture or antiquarian tanglebrush I was struggling to parse. He'd eat his packed lunch, nodding sagely, and pass me copies of articles he'd printed and made notes on. When the first lockdown hit, he called me on a Wednesday evening. He called the next Wednesday as well. To check up. To see how Aerial and I were getting on in our perilously small flat. To walk me through the work he was (or was not) doing in his garden. To ask how my work was (or was not) progressing. He kept calling, every Wednesday, for 79 Wednesdays. Sometimes we'd only talk for a couple minutes. Sometimes we'd talk for an hour. In the darkest, loneliest, bleakest periods of quarantine and isolation, there were months where the sole metric of time available to me were Chris's calls. In the spring and summer of that first year of pandemic, Chris pushed me to apply for a fellowship at the Institute of Historical Research in London. He gave me extensive feedback on

my application. Above all, I am convinced my time spent at the V&A — time which he helped orchestrate — was a deciding factor in my successful application. That fellowship prevented Aerial and myself from having to return to the USA, without income, in the middle of a pandemic.

To this day, Chris's kindness is opening doors to places I never thought I'd go. I will remember Chris as I knew him; as a thoughtful friend and fiercely talented scholar. He passed away surrounded by his family, after a very sudden diagnosis, and my thoughts are with them now. I only knew Chris briefly, for a specific moment in a long and successful life, and though I'm deeply saddened by his departure all I have to do is look around to see the good he's left behind.

You'll be missed, Chris.

Noah Smith



Noah Smith with Chris Pickvance examining a chest in St John the Evangelist, Ickham, Kent. *Photo Aerial Smith*