

HANDOUT for the conference at the Barber Institute, Birmingham
22 February 2014

'Quires and Places where they sang'

This well-known phrase has been adapted by me, using the past tense because the amount and extent of music performed in churches now are very small compared with five hundred years ago, or at any time since. The phrase is taken literally - in two sections:

Quires: the place in cathedrals, colleges and parish churches where choristers and their seniors (vicars choral, secondaries etc) sang the daily offices and high mass, and

Places: which presumably refers to privately-funded chapels and colleges; that is, the chantry colleges of Oxford and Cambridge, the two royal colleges of Eton and Windsor and those founded by church magnates, such as those at Winchester and Rotherham. It also seems to refer to foundations in what seem to us now to be 'normal' parish churches, but which were in fact created by the wealth of a few merchants, such as the rebuilding of Salle, (Norfolk) or by the money and piety of a local seigneur, such as at Etchingham (Sussex) or Strelley (Nottinghamshire).

In the first talk, we will look at what happened in parish church quires, that is the clerical part of the church beyond the rood screen, in about the year 1500. What happened in the colleges was similar - the parish churches took their cue from these, because their priests had often been trained in a collegiate establishment. Here, I just want to write a few words about some aspects of these colleges, whose status in the medieval church is not well known, and perhaps even misunderstood.

Quires in college chapels comprised most of the building, any ante-chapels being relatively small. As in monasteries and cathedrals, a large pulpitum closed off the quire. There was no special need for a rood screen; instead, the reredos of the main or 'high' altar had as its central feature a large crucifix, with its usual flanking figures.

The dissolution or suppression (polite terms for their destruction) of all chantries and colleges and hospitals from the mid-1540s onwards was as serious a blow to society as the previous destruction of the monasteries in the 1530s. There had been around 170 colleges (responsible for the musical training and education of boys, including instruction in singing and organ playing) and around 1200 hospitals, and twice that number of chantries. All the hospitals had chapels - those whose records I have seen also possessed organs - and chaplains; they, and many chantry priests, provided the same sort of educational opportunities as the colleges, but at an even more local level.

When Latin service books were destroyed by order in late 1549, following the introduction of the first prayer book in English, this action completed the destruction of the church's (and therefore the country's) musical resources. It left only a severely depleted cathedral system, some Oxbridge colleges, the two spared royal colleges at Eton and Windsor (plus Winchester), and a few large local churches, to continue any musical education at all within the church. This had been a free education, of course, in return for which the boys had to work: at their music, to serve their masters (the canons or priests who lodged them), and as post-voice-break adolescents to learn their Latin and to write. The most talented of these were taught not only to play the organ but also to compose music for singers and for the organ, and were sent to Oxbridge to take degree courses. (Where for more than three hundred years after 1549, the university syllabus remained tied to clerical rather than lay education,)

So from the pulpitums in these colleges (of which the wooden organ 'lofts' of Colleges such as New and Magdalen at Oxford represent more recent versions), some singing was done, with dramatic effect. An organ was placed there, and these large platforms were accessible directly from the quire. This is a different arrangement to that obtaining in most 'normal' parish churches, where access to the rood lofts was only from the peoples' part of parish churches, west of the screens. (But in the south-western dioceses the loft-platform access doors and stairways are often taller and wider; they also start from the eastern side of the screen, a fact which leads us to think that organs were placed at the end of these rood platforms nearest their stairs so as to be accessible to the singer-players in the quire.)

Most non-university colleges were established in pre-existing parish churches, and were accommodated there by building a new larger chancel and other altars. However, the conflicting demands of college and people often became difficult to reconcile; at Ottery (Devon) a new peoples' nave was built in the early 16th century. At Fotheringhay (Northants.), only the peoples' nave, an addition to the college chancel, remains. Here, the amputation of the former collegiate part has removed two-thirds of the building as well as all the collegiate buildings (cloister, refectory, lodgings, kitchen, stores etc).

Some parish churches (e.g. Salle, Norfolk) seem to have been seen by their builders as 'collegiate' in a looser sense, where a number of priests were fulfilling various chantry commitments in the same building as well as singing the daily offices - and teaching. At Salle there has never been a rood-loft access staircase, and there is now only a hint of a wooden structure which might once have stood between nave and quire. This structure must have doubled as both rood-loft and

pulpitum, and the organ whose presence we know from a footnote to a document of 1386 must have been placed there too. A broadly similar arrangement is still in place at Newark-on-Trent, where stairs east of the substantial rood screen, finished c1508, reach a loft with a (slightly later) east-facing platform, large enough for an organ. Newark had its own choir school, founded in 1532, and this and other major regional centres may prove to have been musically and educationally important parish churches even well into the 17th century.

The two power-point lectures and this handout will be placed on the soundsmedieval.org web-site.