

## Martin Renshaw

### Quires and places where they sang

#### Part II: Places where they sang

Bernard Edmunds Recent Research Conference  
The Barber Institute, University of Birmingham  
Saturday 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2014

Good afternoon. This morning I finished by saying that the whole Church in England resounded with music. How did this happen?

#### Training for life ...

Start early and work hard

- ↓ Learn the repertoire by heart (*first form*)
- ↓ Learn to improvise sung descant to plainsong
- ↓ Learn to play the keyboard – clavichord and organ (*second form*)
- ↓ Learn to improvise a sung bass
- ↓ Learn to write Latin
- ↓ Learn to write music (*third form*)
- ↓ Write down your three-part improvisations (descant, plainsong and bass)
- ↓ Go to university
- ↓ Become a master of music - or perhaps a cardinal (one fine day)



For a start, almost every cleric or priest-clerk went through a thorough training in music from an early age. Each boy was expected to know the whole psalter, and all the canticles and the varied alleluyas, by heart. Then he was tonsured, given a set of choir clothes and allowed to join the other choristers. The boys then progressed through all the various minor orders of the church, moving from one form to the next and learning all the intricacies of the rituals. They were also taught to sing improvised descant and to play the organ. When their voices broke, they were taught the grammar of the language they sang, Latin, and the most promising of them were taught how to write this and their music down. The best organ players were encouraged to write down the best of their improvisations – and so they became composers too. And the brightest boys were prepared to enter the church's colleges at Oxford or Cambridge, some still in their mid-teens. There, they would work their way through their education as servants and common scholars, just as they did as youngsters.

Let's not forget how much time it takes to learn to play a keyboard and improvise on it. A boy's life would have been full then, because it's reckoned now that it takes about 10,000 hours of playing to get one's fingers and brain fully trained up to play a musical instrument. At Ottery, the statutes drawn up by Bishop Grandisson in 1339 included a whole section on the training of the 'pueros choristas', the boy singers:

### **Statute XVIII: De instruccione organici cantus**

*Item: statuimus quod Cantor et Capellanus beate Marie per se uel alios teneantur semper pueros choristas et clericos de secunda forma ad hoc habiles in cantu organico et organicis instrumentis informare et uideant quod tam clerici secundarij quam pueri frequentent missam beate Marie uel grauissime puniantur et gratiam beate uirginis perdant*

Statute 18: On training in singing part-music:

Item, we ordain that the Cantor, and the Chaplain of the blessed Mary, themselves or with others, should always see that they teach the boy singers and the clerks of the second form to become skilled in part-singing and [in playing the] organ-instrument, and as many secondary clerks as boys must attend the mass of the blessed Mary on pain of severe punishment and the loss of our Lady's favour.

Other colleges have similar clauses in their founding statutes – their educational activities were tied into their devotional ones right from the start. Which is why of course we use the word ‘college’ for our secular version (usually much less musical) of these establishments these days.

We know that later there was an organ on the surviving pulpitum loft of the Lady Chapel at Ottery, and another on the pulpitum at the west end of the quire, and another on the ground near the quire stalls. These pulpitums had been built when the college took over and extended the existing parish church in the 1330s.



**The pulpitum in the Lady Chapel Ottery St Mary**

We do not know exactly what sort of organs were at Ottery then, but we do know that in London there were large and small organs in the Temple church and its chancel in 1307, as I mentioned in my article in the recent Journal of the British

Institute of Organ Studies (2013). [See elsewhere on this site.] There were also two organs in the (old) Lady Chapel of Westminster Abbey.

**Westminster Abbey (old) Lady chapel, 1304**

*...unum par Organorum inferius super gradum aliud par maiorum Organorum superius in Muro cum ij pannis depictis circa eadem [sic] extentis.*

...one pair of organs down on the [quire] step and another pair of large organs high up on the wall, with two painted wings stretched around it.

So it is very likely that there were large and small organs at Ottery too, at this date. There must have been multiple organs at Grandisson's cathedral church of Exeter as well. Here, the music gallery in the nave, with carved angels playing all sorts of musical instruments, was built at his command. These organs may well have looked like the one in the carving over the west door at León cathedral, also of this date, the first half of the fourteenth century.

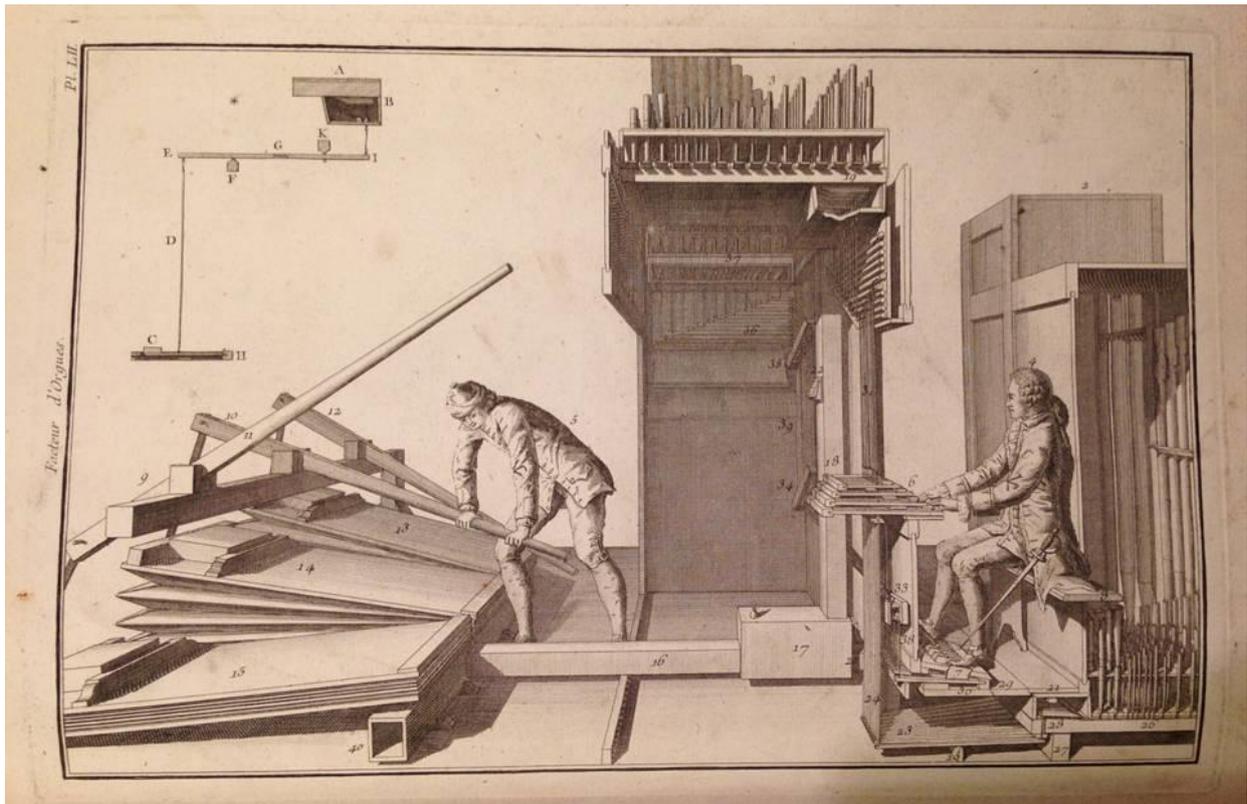


**León Cathedral, northern Spain, early 14<sup>th</sup> century**

The relics of the organ made for Norrlanda in Sweden, which date from the latter half of the fourteenth century, consist of a keyboard connected to a small blockwerk and a pedalboard with a two-rank faburden-like mixture. Four other Swedish windchests from the fourteenth century have this same system. The Robertsbridge fragments indicate clearly that by the middle of the same century in England there were fully-chromatic keyboards. Near the end of the same century, just one day's sailing away from the south coast ports of England including Exeter, across the channel and down the Seine, there was an organ at Rouen cathedral with two keyboards.

In fact, when you think about it, two keyboards - and a pedalboard such as the one on the Norrlanda organ - are almost necessary for playing the improvised repertoire, perhaps especially in the absence of the probably yet-uninvented stop-sliders. The sustained plainchant melody is most easily held down by pedals, and a really skilled player could convincingly weave improvised descants and bass around each other, one on each keyboard. If such a procedure sounds rather familiar, it is: it is the system used a few centuries later by French organists playing their organ masses in the same way, alternately with the singers. Towards the end of the medieval period, English choral singing was not only known for its skill - which the singer-players of the organ would surely try to emulate - but English composers were also famous everywhere because much of their effort went into highly elaborate settings of the mass as well as into the more 'normally'-

elaborated anthems to Our Lady. So the French player of organ masses, towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, was following in a long tradition.



**A French player of organ masses  
L'Art du Facteur d'Orgue (1766-78) Dom Bedos)**

Coming back to England, in just the same year as the documentation for that two-manual organ at Rouen, in 1386, we know that there was already an organ in Cawston church in Norfolk. This was an 'ordinary' parish church, apparently without a documented musical foundation, though it did have medieval quire seating until a fire in the 1780s. The church was also in fierce competition with its neighbour at Salle, less than two miles away.



**Quire seats at  
Salle, Norfolk**

Salle's quire still has 26 misericord quire seats, and this church was given an organ book in the early part of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, seemingly as soon as the chancel was completed. An organ there, placed on a central pulpitum, below a very high crucifix, would have made a very strong statement.



**Rough reconstruction of pulpitum at Salle; cross-section at right**

Dr Roger Bowers wrote to me to say that organs were not necessary to the performance of the English liturgy, and, in a strict sense, this is true. But the evidence is that churches and their benefactors thought otherwise. So much so, that by the time Geoffrey Chaucer was compiling his *Canterbury Tales* – and again we talking about the last quarter of the 14<sup>th</sup> century - he knew he would be well understood when he described the throaty and rather coarse crowing of the arrogant and vain cock, Chanticleer. This bird was no doubt modelled on London singers he had observed, and his voice was, the Nuns' Priest asserted, 'merrier than the organ that plays on mass-days'.

As time went on, following the foundation of the colleges, which as we have seen were training schools for musical clergy, the music they sang became ever more complex. And while on this subject, I would like to correct something I implied in my recent article in the *BIOS Journal* (2013).

The technical change from the blockwerk organ, whose players manipulated key-sliders, to the organ with a keyboard and stop sliders cannot have been made in one leap of imagination. It must have been progressive. The training of these boys we looked at just now and the increasing complexity of the music they sang may be a clue to this. Presumably the later invention of stop-sliders would naturally

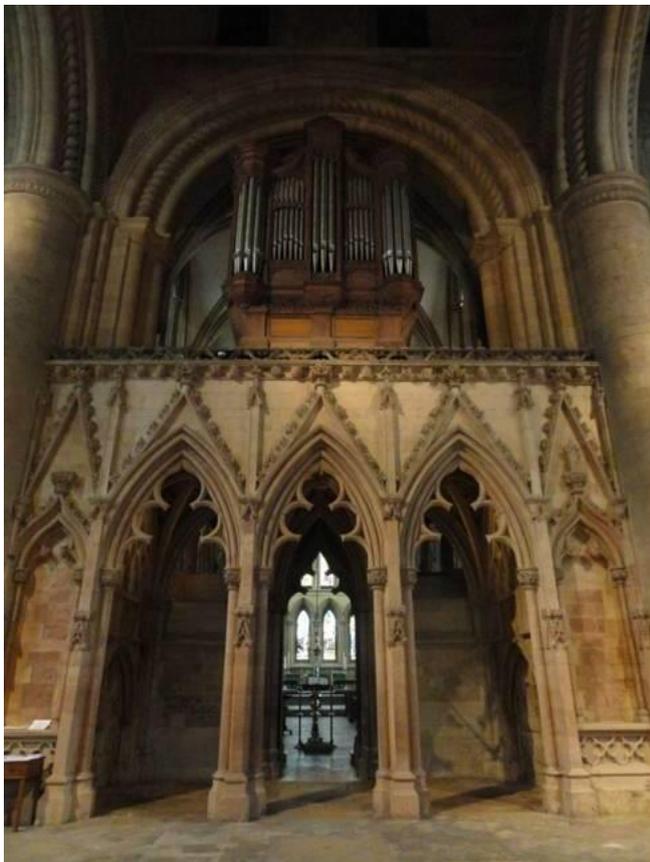
have followed the elaboration and increasing subtlety of polyphony in the major churches from the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century onwards. (But there is no time to go into that now, though we should return to it another time...)

Let us briefly look in more detail at some of the later major medieval establishments.

### Colleges and their chapels

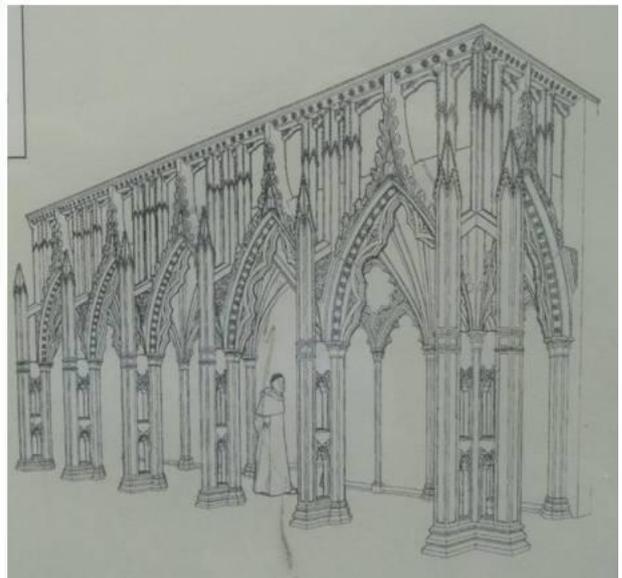
<b>Secular colleges</b>	all over England – about 150 of these
<b>Chantry colleges</b>	at Winchester founded late 14c, Eton late 15c
<b>University colleges</b>	at Oxford and Cambridge, founded either from monasteries or as chantries

*College chapels* consisted entirely of quire-stalls and benches, and were equipped with large pulpitums (imitating perhaps those already in monasteries, minsters and cathedrals).



Southwell Minster, Nottinghamshire

Tintern Abbey, Monmouth



### Pulpitums

These pulpitums, unlike the rood screens, definitely were used for parts of some services because they were easily reached by wide stairs from the quire, or by internal stairways. The pulpitums often had a second (or third) organ on them, whose use can only be guessed at, though one should not exclude possibilities of antiphony between Quire and pulpitum, an obvious extension of antiphony between the two sides of the choristers on the ground.



Winchester College, Hampshire



Southwell Minster, Nottinghamshire

### **Wide and internal stairs**

There is incidentally, evidence for spatial antiphony in another rural Norfolk church; at Aylsham, where an organ was given in a will with the condition that it was tuned to the same pitch as the existing one:

#### **Will of Thomas Boller, priest at Aylsham, Norfolk 1506**

*[the organ was to be] tuned to the same key as the great organs in the church, the principal pipe to be five quarters of a yard long, of good metal ...*

A pipe of 45 inches (5/4 yard) length, would give a pitch of roughly tenor D in modern terms

*Parish churches*, with a few exceptions, which we are currently investigating, did not usually have pulpitums, but by the early 16<sup>th</sup> century they all had rood lofts.

#### **In parish churches**

- Rood lofts across alleys and naves, sometimes moved from their original positions since; access doorways always west of the screens
- Some churches with pulpitums, including perhaps Salle.
- In the west country, screens with large platforms across the whole width of the church, with access doorways east of the screen

Those lofts that were accessible only from the nave, west of the screen (except in the south-west of England) were used only by the person whose job was to trim and refill the lights on its front balustrade. Their staircases were normally far too narrow or steep and their doorways too narrow and low, for general use. The image one has from many church guides of whole choirs trooping up these difficult

stairs, to sing from a narrow, high loft accompanied by an organ already placed there, can, I think, be safely dismissed as fiction. The real problem was that until now historians have not known where these organs were placed. We are not yet sure, but have some ideas on the subject, as you may know, which I will refer to later.

Those very few churches (outside the south-west) whose rood lofts we know to have contained organs had much more easily-accessible doors and stairways than were normal elsewhere. One such was Wingfield, where there was an access to the screen platform in the north aisle from the nave by easy steps cut into the window jambs. Significantly, there was another access, now blocked, leading directly from the Lady chapel to the east of the screen as well.



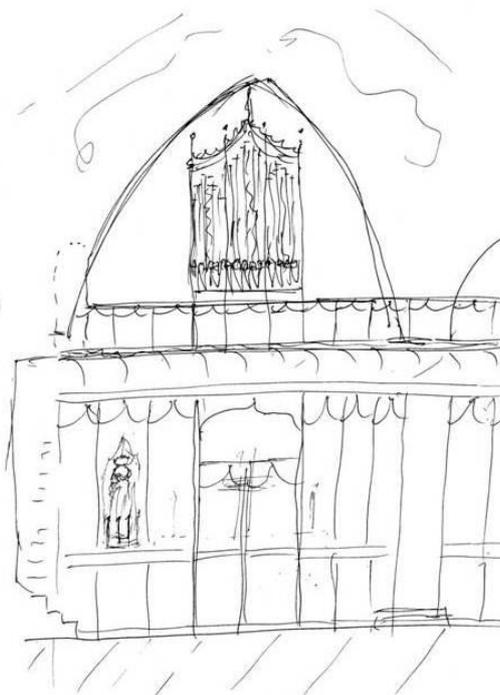
Access to rood platform from the nave



Looking down from the top of the rood stairs into the blocked stairs from the Lady chapel

### **Wingfield northern rood platform access**

Probably the 'Wingfield' organ – seen in the photograph above - stood on this part of the platform, which is no longer in place. There is plenty of headroom here, and potential floor space for it there.



### **Organ on northern rood platform at Wingfield**

Its primary use would therefore seem to have been in conjunction with services in that chapel.

There is only one single church in the City of London where an organ was found to be on a rood loft in the 1549 inventories. This is because these buildings – like all crowded town-centre churches – were simply too small to have a wide enough loft platform, and a wide access to it. By contrast, where the church was in a large provincial town-centre on a large plot of ground, such as at Newark, there was room for a much more substantial rood-loft. Here it is obvious that an eastwards extension was created to support an organ, making in effect a normal rood-loft into a quasi-pulpitum. At Newark there are 26 quire-stalls, the same number as at rural Salle – and at Stratford-on-Avon. In 1532 a choir school was founded there to teach six choristers to learn to sing and play the organ.

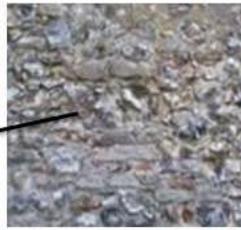
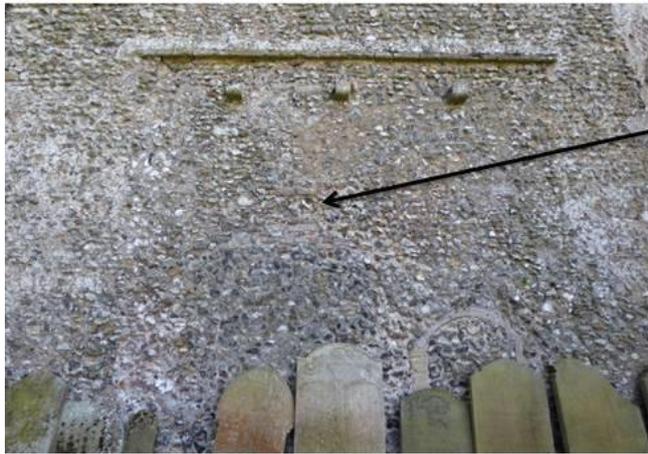


from below

### **Newark on Trent rood screen, eastwards extension**

In churches outside the south-west, the solution to accommodating organs, choirs and bellows seems to have been the ‘double-storey north-east building’ solution we discussed in a lecture here two years ago. Since then we have surveyed nearly 300 churches out of the 800 we first intended to visit. We have quite consistently found that this ‘double storey’ solution seems to have been adopted in places where an organ is documented. Here are just two pictures of the remains of NE buildings which have been allowed to fall down.

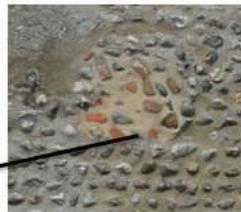
These now plaster-less walls show where roof beams were supported, where any intermediate floor’s joists were placed – and even signs of wind-trunk holes at the ‘right’ height to feed into a soundboard of an organ on the north wall of the chancel the other side of the wall. These wind-trunk holes were usually at around 13 feet up from internal floor level, in fact ...



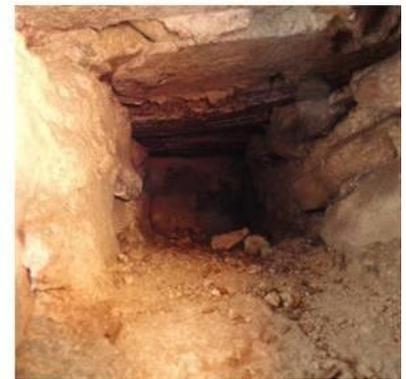
Great Massingham,  
Norfolk

**Actual wind trunk hole  
within north chancel wall**

Dennington, Norfolk



Kelling, Norfolk



**Possible wind trunk holes revealed in walls of ruined NE buildings**

You will perhaps remember that I mentioned this morning that the conductor looked towards the organ and the organ then sounded. In a few places we have seen, there are slit windows in these upper storeys. These are aligned towards the easternmost seat on the south side of the choir, next to the chancel door.



Wingham College,  
Kent



Cawston,  
Norfolk



**Lines of sight**

At Walpole St Peter (Norfolk) there is what seems to have been a small book cupboard in the wall near this seat. At Stratford-on-Avon, there is a fixed seat in this position in front of the quire stalls, and this seems to be there to allow a conductor to move easily into a position where he can be seen by all the singers. So we wonder if the master of the singers – the conductus, as he was sometimes called – sat there? From this position he would have been able to communicate with the plainly-dressed man whose job it was to operate the bellows of the organ. And by some simple gesture, or just by rising from his seat, the master could indicate to him when the organ was required.

Our hypothesis that the organ was generally placed on the north side of the quire may be questioned. After all, even such an authority as Frank Llewellyn Harrison quoted Aymer Vallance who wrote in the 1930s that “*the rood-loft solved the problem of accommodating singers of prick-song and organ or other instrumental accompaniment*”, and that “*this was the primary cause of its introduction and its real duty*”. The fact that Harrison quotes this without question - even with approval - in his otherwise erudite and penetrating book, *Medieval Music in England*, is really surprising.

There is absolutely no reason to suppose that the rood platform was normally there for any reason except to give access to maintain the rood lights. It may have been used very occasionally in particularly dramatic liturgical situations, such as the Passion Sunday gospel, but only if access to it made this possible.



Cawston, Norfolk



Wing, Buckinghamshire

### **‘Easy’ and difficult loft stairs**

Most staircases are narrow (often barely two feet wide), unlit, with high steps and low headroom. They often start a couple of feet or more above ground level in the nave or aisle, and are generally completely unsuitable for anyone dressed in four

yards of heavy clerical robes and a clerk's hat – and still less suitable for anyone robed in expensive, finely-embroidered eucharistic vestments.

Any idea that most rood lofts were built for music is also surprising, because there was always more than adequate seating in stalls with misericord-seats for a choir of sufficient size. As we have seen, the singers are in minor orders. They entered the chancel by their own door, the rood-screen door normally being locked. These singers would therefore have had no access to the rood-loft staircase anyway, which is – as we saw - consistently placed in the alleys on the western, nave side of the screen; the loft access at Wingfield from the former Lady Chapel is highly exceptional. A moment's reflection over the practical considerations involved would surely have made Vallance and Harrison reconsider such ideas.

Several sixteenth-century churchwardens' accounts note the 'removal' (that is, moving) of an organ in the context of work on rood screens and platforms. As a result of such entries, many historians who do not know the historical meaning of words think that the 'removed' organs were taken away altogether. In fact they were moved somewhere else in the church and rebuilt, often at considerable expense, as at Mildenhall in Suffolk.

Other historians have noticed that work on screens and work on organs was going on at the same time, and have drawn the wrong conclusion: namely, that the organ was always on the screen platform. Proof that this was not always the case, even in the south-west, is in such examples as the contract signed in 1513 at Stratton in Cornwall:

#### **Stratton, Cornwall 1513**

*... the sayd John Dawes and John Pares ... shall sett the dexis of the queye agen and make or cawse to be made a sufficyant Stage for the organs yn the sayd Northe Amletore a hye by ye vawte of the sayd roloft by the Advyce of a organ maker ...*

*...the said John Dawes and John Pares .... shall remake the quire stalls and make or cause to be made a strong enough platform for the organ in the north ambulatory at the same height as the coving of the said roodloft, with advice from an organ maker...*

It was worth around a million pounds in modern purchasing power. Here, the chief contractors for the joiners, carvers and painters of a vast new screen, and its attendant side screens to the quire, were told to consult with the organ maker about a platform for the organ behind the singers, high up near the screen.

However, sometimes it seems that some organs were on the large, easily-accessible platforms in south-western churches. Many later-medieval Devon and Cornwall churches in the diocese of Exeter have tall 'barrel' roofs in their nave and alleys. These are roofs that curve upwards to their ridges and are sometimes fitted with longitudinal planks that look like the inside of barrels. These shapes are acoustically very beneficial, as the roofs transmit the sound of one side of a choir

to another as well as along the ridge of the roof out into the church beyond the transverse rood-screen. An organ standing on the north or south end of such a screen, and facing into a guild chapel, would also look magnificent and sound out straight into both church and quire. It will be interesting to see if this is how the Chappingtons worked. We do know that, much later, the young John Loosemore worked on an organ still on the wide screen platform in Hartland church in remote NW Devon in the 1620s. It may be that this is a survival of a well-established method; we will see ...

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We have come to the perhaps rather obvious conclusion that chancels were designed solely for singing and playing, and that they contained all that was needed for these activities. This is 'perhaps obvious', because churches, like other buildings, are practical places and were designed from the start for their various functions. Here are some examples of why we think this.

We have found by measurement that so many quires are double-cubes that it seems that by the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century these proportions had been found by practical experience to be ideal acoustically for music. And where Victorian restorers have not removed original roofs, chancel ceilings are often also designed to aid singing by their reflective shape. When there are eight or nine offices to be sung every day, taking perhaps four hours, it is clearly important that the singers are aided as much as possible by their surroundings.



**Reflective  
chancel ceiling**

Rattlesden, Suffolk

They might be helped by other devices, too. So-called 'acoustic jars' and acoustic void spaces under the quire stalls were also evidently built in as attempts to

improve the acoustic qualities of the singers' working space, the chancel. Whether we think they actually work acoustically is beside the point. The important thing is that the attempt was made.



Lyddington, Rutland



Denford, Northamptonshire



Salle, Norfolk



Newark, Nottinghamshire



Tilney All Saints, Norfolk

### Acoustic jars and other voids

The singers' centrally-placed music desks still survive in a few places, always disguised now as bible lecterns, with additional wider or reinforced ledges for the later, thicker bibles. Their tops swivel, presumably so as to give everyone the best view.



Cratfield, Suffolk



Lenham, Kent



Ivinghoe, Bucks



Shipdham, Norfolk

### Music Desks

They are just the right height for youths, but a boy might need a low pedestal (or foot-stool) to stand on – and indeed the purchase of these can be found sometimes in churchwardens' accounts.

It is very difficult to reimagine the chancels as they were, and to peel away the five centuries of neglect and misunderstanding:

### **Medieval chancels as they were designed**

- Without extra steps up to a high altar
- Without altar rails
- Usually with only a small carpet in front of the altar
- With a low reredos behind the altar
- With two candles and a crucifix on the altar
- With two large candlesticks either side of the altar at the entrance to the sanctuary



Toddington, Bedfordshire

- With floor tiling whose patterns were apparently designed to indicate the spaces where clerks gathered before and after offices, and before and after processions
- With plenty of space round central lecterns, and cupboards for music books
- With large south windows containing translucent grisaille glass in them so as to light the singers' books; perhaps smaller or fewer windows on the north side, and perhaps clerestory windows in the larger quires
- Sometimes with lower side windows to light the desks of the chief singers
- With the quire stalls and their tall backs and benches for boys in front of them
- With organ galleries on their otherwise blank north walls and organ cases rising towards the roof timbers
- The quire space enclosed by the brightly-coloured rood-screen and its coving jutting out over the return stalls, and by panels above the stalls.

Compare these descriptions with the all-too-familiar Victorian chancel, crowded

### **Victorian chancel**



March, Cambridgeshire

with parallel choir stalls and further reduced in circulation space by altar rails, with an ugly organ and dark stained glass – and a vacuum cleaner. (All this in a church whose nave is deservedly known as one of the finest in England, with its amazing hammerbeam ‘angel’ roof.)

Or, if we are feeling smug about the Victorians’ lack of awareness, let us compare the medieval working space with a present-day chancel.



Terrington St Clement,  
Norfolk



Terrington St Clement,  
Norfolk



Cullompton,  
Devon

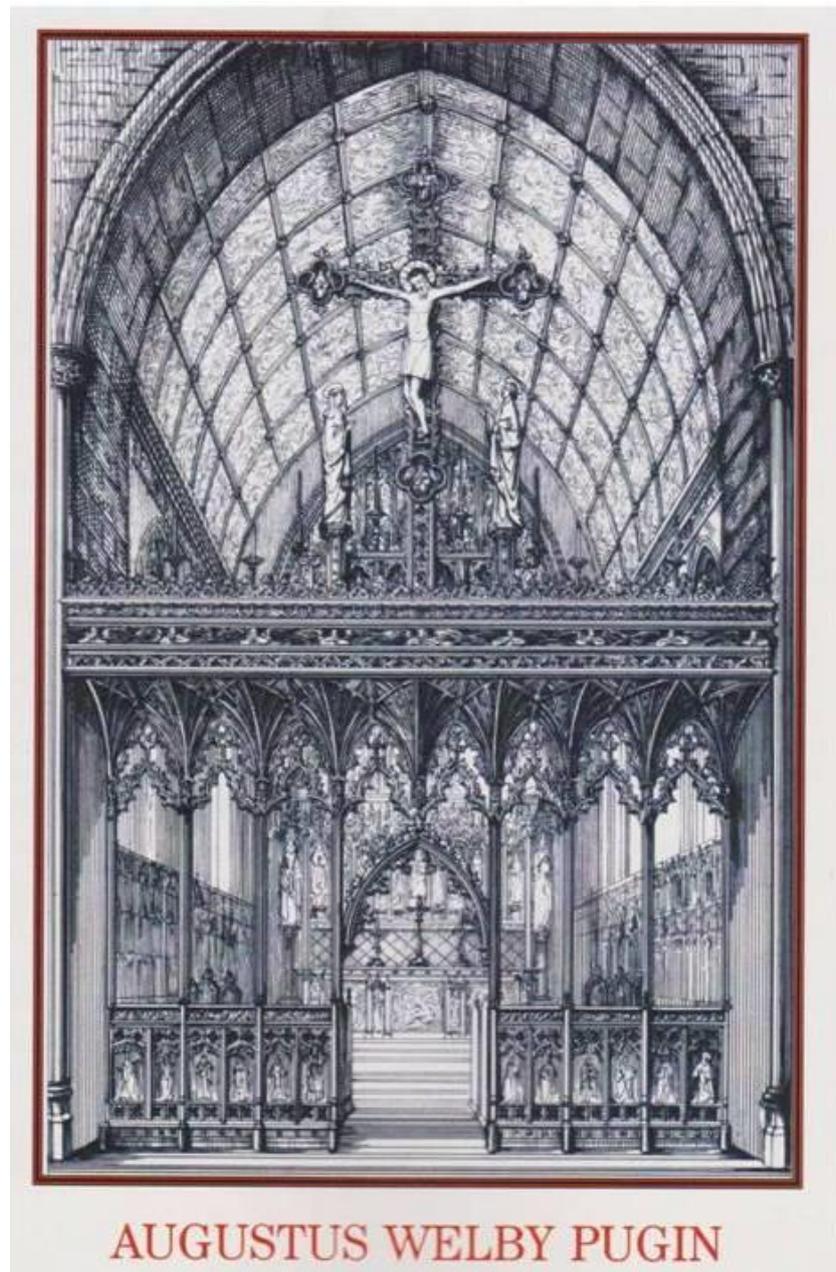
### **‘Modern’ chancels**

These are now often completely abandoned (for the second time in the church’s history) in favour of an altar west of the chancel arch. Too many have now become places for dumping extra chairs, or they resemble sitting rooms, complete with sofas. Boxes of duplicating paper are put on choir seats, and unused hymn books and drum kits are shoved into odd corners which once were chantries or chapels. To crown everything, a cinema screen is perched on a pulpit, or a flood-light fixed to a rood screen.

The real problem is that we have received chancels as they were re-invented by Victorian architects and their clients. They did not understand that chancels were designed originally for daily working use by the boys, clerks and priests who were there to sing services. So it takes us a real and determined effort of the imagination to see medieval chancels as they were first designed and furnished.

Our research is going on alongside complementary research into other features of medieval buildings. These include studies of angel roofs, roof bosses, graffiti, screens, misericords, scratch dials, Easter sepulchres and so on, things that have never been properly investigated before. All these studies are showing that there is far more to a church than purely architectural ornament. Indeed, screens and quire-stalls, ceilings and lecterns – usually regarded as ‘just furnishings’ - were

absolutely vital to the original function of the chancel. Pugin was right when he said that ornament was only justifiable when it was applied to a practical structure. I don't think that architectural historians have quite understood what he was driving at when he said this. But take a look at this drawing, made by Pugin for a short book on rood-screens he published in 1851:



**A Treatise on  
Chancel Screens and  
Rood Lofts 1851**

This shows a knowledge of the medieval chancel far ahead of his time. It is far from the basic 'middle pointed of the Camden Society and their successors in Cambridge and Oxford; the chancel is well-lit, the ceiling is curved for maximum efficiency. The only error (also committed by later architects and designers such as Comper) is in leaving out the candle-bearing front parapet of the screen platform, and therefore putting the rood and accompanying statues too far forward and too low. Pugin also knew the difference between a 'parish church' screen and a 'cathedral' pulpitum and knew about their different original contexts. But his ideas were largely ignored by the commercialised, standardising Victorians, many of whom removed screens illegally because they were not of the 'middle-pointed',

'correct' period of gothic design. Or like their Roman counterparts, followed the Council of Trent's dictates rather than the music-based English chancel design.

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We have, I think, begun to understand quite a lot about the life of musicians in the later medieval period and the context within which they operated. We have in fact found a whole world that we never expected, and not just discoveries about organs. The whole world of medieval music, in its original design context, is opening out, as we work on the nexus of music, archaeology and history.

### **Our research:**

We are revising accepted ideas by

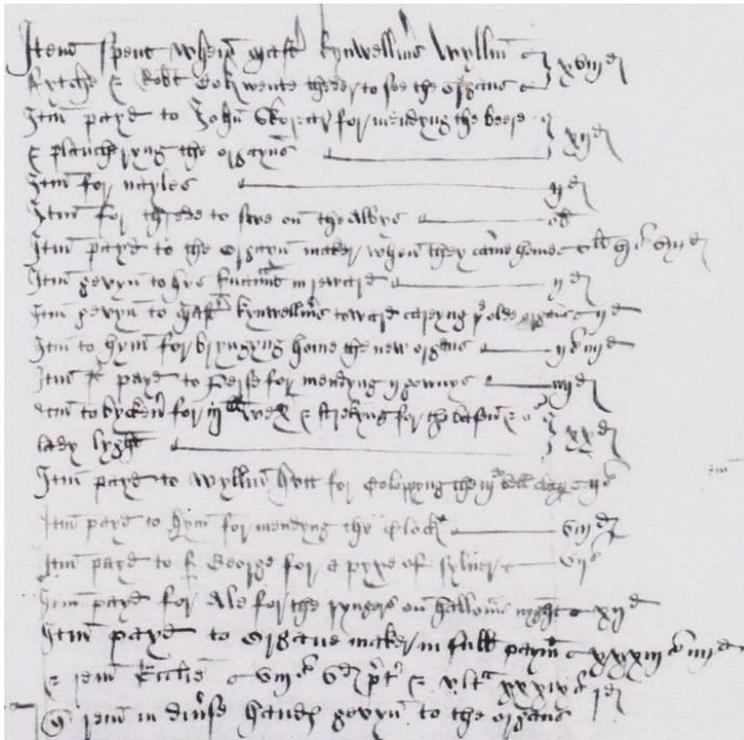
- *Finding* physical remains of the infrastructure of medieval music in hundreds of churches
- *Realising* that churches as left by the Victorians are not the same in some essential respects as those planned by their original builders
- *Re-interpreting* the various spaces of medieval churches and especially their chancels and north-east buildings
- *Discovering* that a purely architectural-history approach to these buildings is inadequate to their interpretation; music and archaeology are just as important.

And we are finding that both documentary research and surveys in the actual buildings are mutually inseparable. The rewards from doing both of these together are enormous.

All this results from the question Dr Peter Williams posed here at the Barber Institute – was it eight years ago? Actually, we don't yet have an answer for him to his question, which was 'How many organs there were in churches around 1500?' But we are gradually edging nearer to a much deeper understanding of the whole context in which the development of organ playing, designing and making took place before the revolutions of the Reformation period.

Meanwhile, in looking for the answer to Peter Williams' question, we have also begun to find possible answers to a much wider and even more crucial question:

### **Where are the origins of English music?**



Here, for instance?

**Churchwardens' accounts  
Great Dunmow, Essex**

Any answers to that question should surely interest every musician and historian.