

## ***From Boat-Boy to Cardinal: Music and Education in the later Middle Ages***



Martin Renshaw

Campaign for the Traditional Cathedral Choir

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I wonder how many of us who have been educated musically by singing in churches have reflected on how this system of training evolved? How it was built up, and how often it has come close to complete destruction over the last five hundred years?

There are two lessons that we *might* learn from history. The first is an optimistic one: that music is so important a part of our existence on earth that it has the power to survive the attacks of the philistines, whether these are dressed in blue pin-stripes or in cassocks. But if we are pessimistic, we can also see that a flourishing system of education and training was once nearly mortally wounded in a matter of a few months by a combination of government and church politics. And if that has happened once before, it might happen again.

We will look at that in due course, but I think it will be useful first to sketch in the background to the long history of church music in this country. This will help us to understand better the changes made to it, and incidentally (I hope) to understand better too why churches of all sizes where music was practised were designed the way they were.

At its peak around 1500, music in churches was practised in Britain to an extent that we can hardly imagine now. By this I mean it was performed with never again so many people involved or to such a generally high level of competence. It was practised here with such expertise and professionalism that other countries looked on with envy. Even French commentators, in the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, admitted that their own music was being influenced by what they called the English style. English music, they said, was mellifluous, harmonious and complex. This was true, but what was really even more important for the future was the fact that it was being composed on a scale that had never been attempted before.

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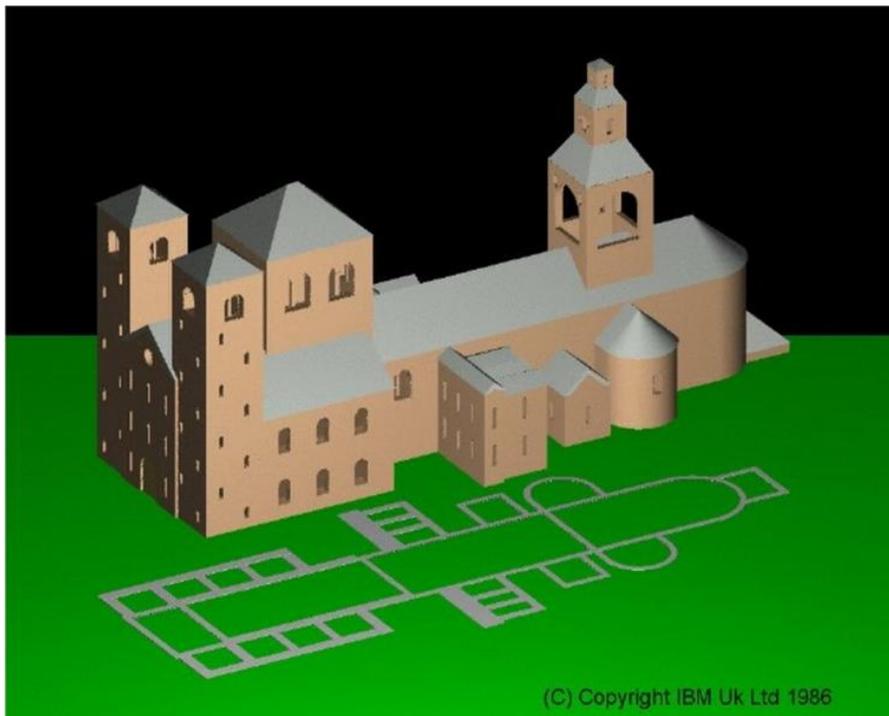
But first, how did we get there?



**La Meilleraye-de-Bretagne, Cistercian (Trappist) Abbey**

By the 6<sup>th</sup> century, the Roman branch of early Christianity had taken musical pre-eminence over all the others. Under the nominal guidance of the first Pope Gregory, Roman chant – known to us as plainchant or plainsong – was established as the normal music for the north-western European sector of the church. This sector of Christianity had in effect taken over where the western part of the Roman empire had left off. It was to remain the dominant force, culturally and economically, for a thousand years until the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. It needs to be considered as one large area, united musically and culturally - and indeed (therefore) architecturally. It should not be thought of, as we in Britain have been accustomed to doing since the later 16<sup>th</sup> century, as if it consisted of a series of nations with fixed borders or social groups, but as one over-arching ecclesiastical structure.

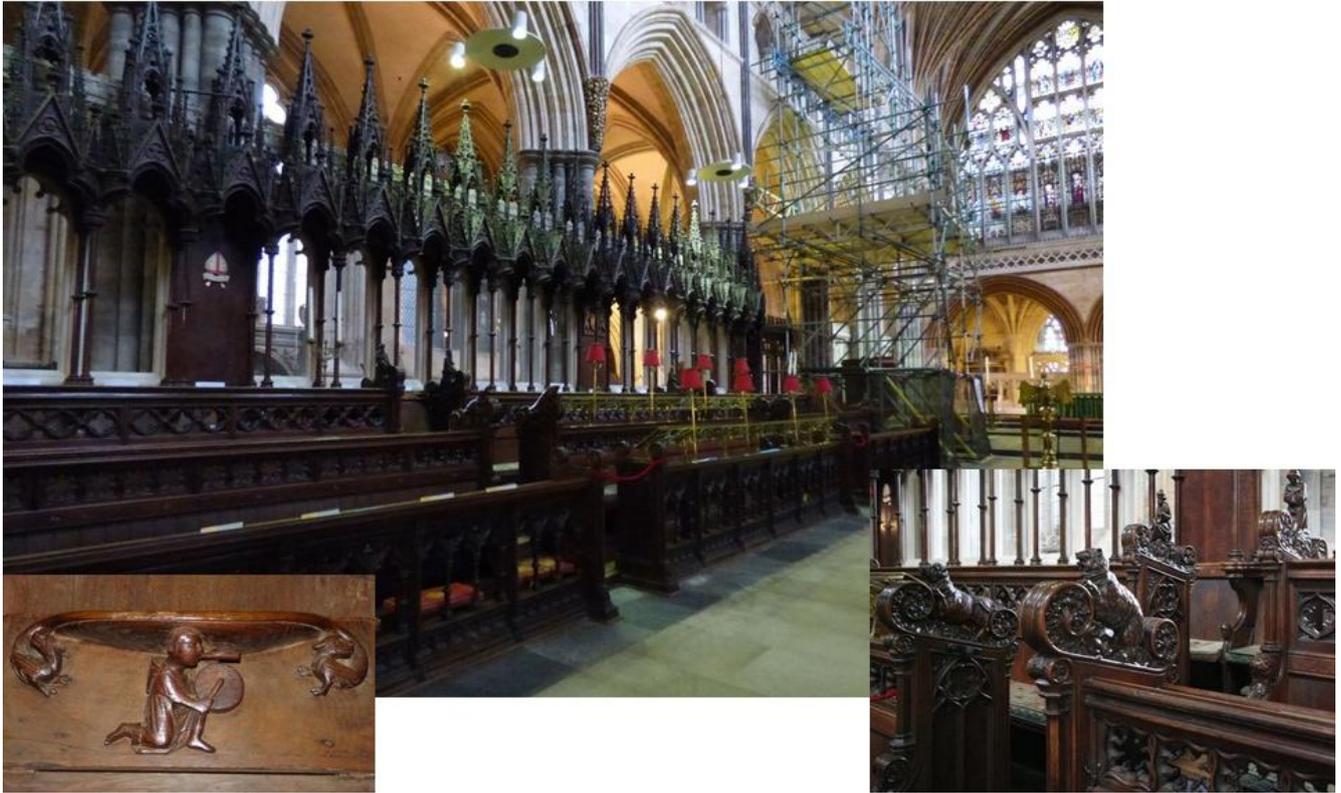
This structure none the less did have to allow for a remarkable degree of local flexibility. This can be seen especially in the actual application of the basic requirements for providing the means of carrying out the daily liturgies and their music – what we might now call their infrastructure.



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**Computer model of the Old Minster, Winchester**

Once the post-Roman empire church in Britain had become officially Romanised following the Synod of Whitby at the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century, minster churches were established as feeder churches for what were later to become parish churches. These minsters were staffed by a group of priests with its own hierarchy – a dean or warden at its head – that was collegiate. In other words, a group ‘linked or bound together’ by common purposes, the chief of these being to perform the eight daily offices and the daily community mass. Among the resources available to them were gifts of land whose rental income the college could use as it thought fit. This was spent first on providing the working area of these churches, their quires, and the necessary equipment for these services.



**Exeter: earliest set of English Misericords (50 in all) 1220-1230; 1250-1260**

We don't have much detail from documents over the precise equipment that an Anglo-Saxon minster might have possessed. However, we do know that several of them were provided with organs, so we might expect that they had everything else that was needed: quire stalls, music books, vestments,



**Liturgical Vestments said to have been worn by Thomas Becket while in Sens (1164-65, 1166-70)**



English Chalice c.1200



Gloucester candlestick c.1104-13



St Nicholas Crozier c.1150-1170

© Victoria and Albert Museum, London

candlesticks, chalices and ornate altar furniture.

The second purpose of these collegiate establishments was to furnish priests for the fledgling parish churches, so they became teaching establishments, the cultural centres of their various hinterlands. This aspect of their collegiate life was to have far-reaching consequences for the establishment and embellishment of music performed by the band of priests and singers working there.

The conquest of most of Britain by the Normans in the later eleventh century saw a new emphasis on the monastic system.



**Winchester monastic cathedral**

Some collegiate minsters became monastic cathedrals – an idea unique to Britain – while other new cathedrals remained in the hands of non-monastic or ‘secular’ clergy. Meanwhile the new parish churches, most of them rebuilt and enlarged under Norman rule, were administered by diocesan structures. For a while the out-going colleges were overtaken in terms of resources and prestige by inward-looking enclosed monasteries. These monasteries, especially in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, had sprung up everywhere, but mostly away from existing settlements, under various versions of the Rules of St Benedict: those followed by Benedictines, Cistercians and Cluniacs, for example. They were later followed by the unenclosed friaries who by contrast settled in towns.

In the later 13<sup>th</sup> century, in the by-then well-established parish churches, the list of equipment that had to be provided just by the lay folk was long. This was in addition to what had to be provided by the Rector or administrator or owner of the church. We know what was on this list from various sources, and it included a good deal of music.

<b>Unum ordinale</b>	<b>An ordinal</b>
<b>ij portiforia</b>	<b>2 small breviaries</b>
<b>iiij antiphonalia</b>	<b>3 antiphonars</b>
<b>legenda temporalis et sanctorum</b>	<b>lessons of times (seasonal) and saints</b>
<b>ij psalteria</b>	<b>2 psalters</b>
<b>martilogium</b>	<b>martyrs' book</b>
<b>manuale</b>	<b>a manual</b>
<b>iiij missalia</b>	<b>3 missals</b>
<b>iiij gradalia</b>	<b>3 graduals</b>
<b>unus troparius</b>	<b>a troper</b>
<b>ij processionalia</b>	<b>2 processionals</b>

**Tilney All Saints 1386: List of music books for a coastal village, typical for East Anglia**

At a minimum, every church had to be equipped with eight hand-written books, of which at least five were music books. Inventories made from the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards show that this stock of books had risen in even quite normal parish churches to over forty books of all sizes and kinds, the majority of them music books. These included mass-books, books for processions (litanies, we would call these), the 'graduals' which contained anthems of various kinds to be sung at mass, invitatories (special anthems used only occasionally at particular festivals) and psalters. The largest books were called 'volumes', this word meaning a large book which could be up to 30 inches tall. They usually contained composed polyphonic antiphons (or anthems) and were therefore called antiphoners.



Singers, antiphoner & music desk



Old Hall MSS



Antiphoner binding



Eton Choirbook

**Illuminated Antiphoners**

In addition, there were the books with the texts of the mass and other services. It was the music for the mass and the music in the antiphoners that was written from around the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards that so aroused the admiration of the French for the skills of John Dunstable, Leonel Power and their contemporaries.

But much of this equipment, including the music books, was not for use by the people themselves, although they bore the initial cost of providing it and then the costs of its continuing repair. The lay parishioners did not have access to the areas occupied by the clergy but had their own part of the building for their own multifarious, extra-curricular and social purposes.

Now is the moment to look at how all church buildings, whether in the western or the eastern parts of the Christian world, were arranged at this time. Like every building, they were designed for definite purposes, because they were places of work: for the clergy at their eastern ends and for the people in their western parts. So, the churches were divided into two distinct parts; one or two churches still are:



**Eastwell, Leics: complete stone screen division**

Eastwell in Leicestershire still has a complete wall to divide them - but most were eventually opened

**Great Bardfield, Essex**



**Westwell, Kent**



**Stone chancel-nave arch divide**

up so that the people could see, and above all hear, what the clergy were doing in their name and partly at their willing expense. The manner of the division ranged from stone arches – as at Westwell in Kent and Great Bardfield in Essex, both originally filled with further woodwork screening - to those

elaborate and very expensive painted wooden screens which go right across the whole church that are familiar to church visitors in the east and south-west of England and the Welsh borders.

**Full length west country screens**

Patrishow, Monmouth (including balustrade)



Kentisbeare, Devon



Uffculme, Devon

This division was quite a rigid one; lay people did not cross it, and the clergy did so only for particular purposes. The clergy had their own entrance to the eastern end of the building.

*Through chancel doors...*



Heckington, Lincs



Crick, Northants

*to the south porch for marriages and churchings...*



Mendelsham, Norfolk

*to the font for christenings...*



Sapcote, Leics

*and to the bier for burials.*



Broadway, Worcs

**Clergy movements**

This is now normally and inaccurately called the priest's door, as if he was the only one to use it, which was far from the case. It was for the use of all those that worked in this part of the church, and there could be quite a number of these, as we will see. Through this door the clergy would leave the east end of the church building, having robed in the vestry or sacristy adjacent to the quire. They would go outside the church towards the peoples' church porch to perform marriages, christenings, churchings of women after childbirth and, completing the cycle of life, to accompany a corpse to its grave following a requiem mass in the chancel.

This is the two-part division of a church building at its simplest; it became more complex as time went on. But this arrangement remained essential to how the building was designed and how it worked, and it needs to be kept in mind as we go along.

I mentioned that the eastern parts of the church were designed for the clergy to do their work, so I had better define what is meant by 'clergy'. This does not only mean the Dean, or Warden or parish priest who had been given the charge of his establishment, but also potentially a number of clerks in various lower orders. We are dealing here with a church organisation that is full of hierarchies of various kinds, human and corporate, and that stratification was reflected right down through the whole system. So when I called this talk 'from boat-boy to cardinal' I meant both to emphasise the extent of this hierarchy (perhaps better called a 'structure') - and to illustrate the potential inherent in the medieval system. It was a system that could allow anyone to rise through it, and it did. And everything in this system depended on what was going on in what we now call the chancel.

Here were the quire stalls for the singers and the senior clergy, the sacristy to house and protect the vestments and the precious altar furniture such as the chalices, thuribles – and incense boats. Music and mass books were kept here,



**Worcester antiphoner**

especially those volumes that were ornamented with silver-gilt clasps and whose wooden covers were studded with semi-precious stones. Otherwise, if smaller, they were kept in cupboards placed strategically round the east end near the altars they were used at.

### Dorchester, Oxfordshire



### Cupboards for keeping books

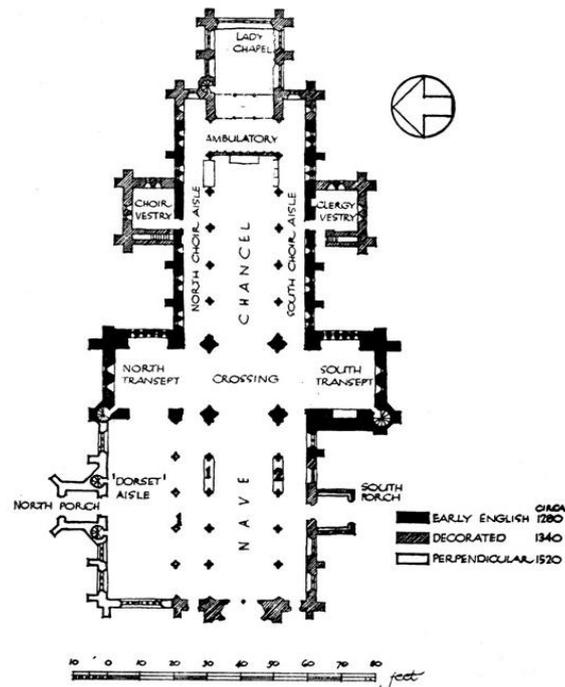
Because as time went on, the main or 'high' altar was supplemented with the various chapels needed for chantry priests and altars for guilds. In the later medieval period, there were also altars in the people's church, in front of the rood screen, for early-morning masses ; often there were more altars in screened-off side chapels too.



### Dennington, Suffolk: parclose screens in nave

In parish churches there were basically three services a day which parishioners could attend and hear: matins (in the early morning), mass at the main or 'high' altar at mid-morning, and vespers or evensong late in the afternoon. The parish priest was also expected, with any other clergy, to sing either in the quire or in private oratories in their houses the other daily offices or 'hours'. These were their daily obligations, in addition to the weddings, christenings, churching and funerals that the 'houceling' adult parishioners and their children might require from time to time: the 'occasional' services. And in the later medieval church these basic services became the core around which chantry

masses were sung in chantry chapels, or as they would say 'at chantry altars', since a 'chapel' was regarded as a separate building, whether within the church yard or elsewhere in the parish. Masses were also sung for and at the cost of particular church guilds, especially in the larger town churches.



**Ottery St. Mary**

In purely-collegiate churches there were no such parochial requirements, just as in cathedrals, but when colleges were established in previously purely-parochial church buildings, things became a lot more complicated. Especially since there was not only the daily round of masses to accommodate but there were also the eight canonical offices which stretched from day-break to dusk, from Matins and Lauds to Compline.

Eventually there was a large amount of what we might now call 'plant' to service. By the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and now we come to the nub of the matter and the centre of this talk, this needed a large number of clerics of all kinds and ages.



**Quire stall clerks: Stowlangtoft, Suffolk**

The quire stalls were filled with singers, at least on high days and holy days, and the many altars had to be staffed with junior priests and with deacons and sub-deacons. In addition, going downwards through the orders, the staff consisted of holy-water clerks, a sexton, the acolytes who carried processional crucifixes,



**Bosworth crucifix mid-15<sup>th</sup> century**

candle-bearers and finally - at the bottom of the pile - boat-boys. All these were technically clerks and were tonsured even at an early age, and a boy – and they were of course all boys and men – might start work at the age of five or six carrying the incense boat.



**Boat 'angel': Gloucester Lady chapel**

This job of carrying the incense boat may not sound very onerous. These days the boat-boy - where he still can be found – works just in the sanctuary and is seen by the congregation shadowing the thurifer in the usually short procession from vestry to the altar. He sits or stands around quite a lot of the time. But in the medieval church, the procession at the start of the high mass on a Sunday or feast day was a long and significant part of the service. We know such processions better under the title they were given by Cranmer when they were ordered to be sung in English for the first time. The Litany was in fact the first service (if you can call it that) to be ordered to be sung in English, in 1547.

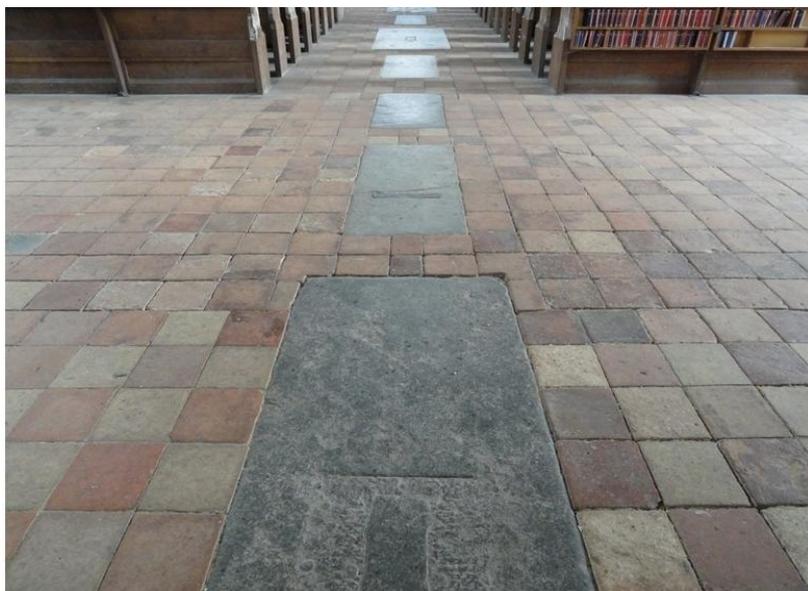
On Sundays and feast days, the doors in the rood screen which separated the two parts of the church were unlocked to allow the clergy through.

Hartland, Devon



**Through the rood screen**

From there the procession usually involved going through the south and north doorways in the peoples' church and, if there was one, through the west doorway as well.



**Ledgers along the nave processional route, Salle church, Norfolk**

Since on the most holy feasts the sacrament was carried in its pyx along these routes, the processional path down the centre of the church was a favoured place for tombs, as were the porches themselves. Even places in the graveyard near the west door were sought after.



**Screen with Rood**

The procession, which had made several halts, would ultimately stop at a 'station' facing eastwards on the peoples' side of the rood screen. This was in order to venerate the huge crucifix that hung over or was fixed into the east side of the screen platform. It was lit by a large wax candle as well as all the other lights ranged along the front of the rood-beam parapet. The veneration concluded, the procession re-started with the first antiphon, the introit, named after the 'going into' the sanctuary through the screen, with its text and music appropriate to the high mass for the day. You can imagine that a long procession with a number of stations would need a considerable amount of work to keep the thurible replenished; a boat full of incense might be quite empty even before the main service got under way. The boat-boy was therefore like everyone else: a responsible member of a potentially large liturgical team.

There was a cross-over between those who had other jobs and the quire-stalls, who were known by the generic term of 'chorista', those who served in the quire. And being a boat-boy meant that you started to learn very early on how to find your way around the church and sanctuary - like an actor around a stage. You could hardly avoid beginning to learn the music of the psalms, canticles and hymns either, because you heard them being sung all the time. If you were to be admitted as a chorister, you would have had to have learned all these by heart first anyway. Only then would you qualify for a seat on the bench placed in front of the fixed quire-stalls.

This bench was called a 'form' and so you naturally started in the quire on the first form, just as many of us did at our primary school. Your aim was to reach the second and even third forms, and reaching these higher levels would define the stages in your career as a church musician.



Walpole St Peter, Norfolk



Boy's benches: the 1<sup>st</sup> forms

In the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, the college idea began to spread again, this time under the patronage of local magnates or lords of the manor. They seem to have come to think that singing for the good of their souls could be done as well, and certainly more ostentatiously, in their own parish churches as in a closed monastery. Even better, a well-chosen chantry priest could not only help the parish priest in his service duties but would also have the time to teach in the local community. Teach, that is: Latin grammar, singing and the increasingly complex music and ceremonial of the church.

And by the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century he could also be expected to teach young choir boys to play the organ as well.

**I will that ... the ... church wardens ... shall hire on an annual basis a suitable and appropriately-trained clerk to serve at and assist in holy worship in the said church of St Martin at Fincham, and to play the organ, and to teach children so that God's worship may be improved and supported,**

**and they are to pay him a mark [13s 4d] every year from the ... rents and profits, to be paid four times a year, that is 40d [3s 4d] a quarter, and that the said mark will not be deducted from his pay for work he does for the parish ...**

#### **Nicholas Fincham's will, 1505**

By the early 15<sup>th</sup> century, two hundred years and a great deal of church building and rebuilding later, there were around 200 colleges in England and Wales. Most of these were actually inside existing parish churches or very closely associated with them, so they had a very strong influence on parochial life. A few were founded as stand-alone colleges such as Winchester and Eton, and some had parochial additions made to them, as at Fotheringhay, where the parish part, less than a third of what is there now, is all that survives.



**Fotheringhay, original buildings (reconstructed model)**

Or as at Astley in Warwickshire

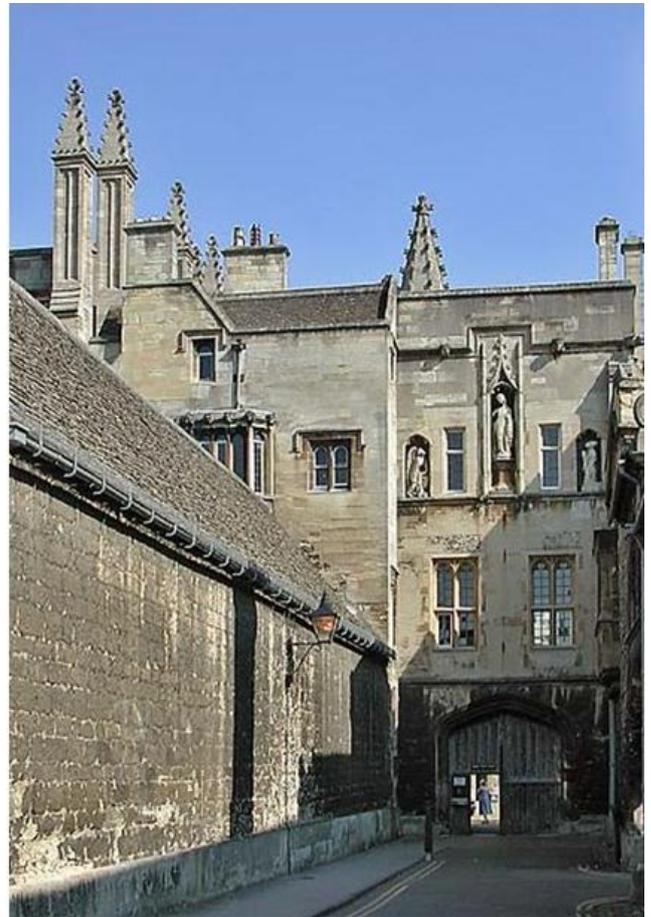


**Astley, Warwicks with Quire stalls**

where it is the college part, the chancel, that is now used as the nave of a rather surprisingly large parish church in the middle of the forest of Arden. The original choir stalls are still there, though turned around and put at the east end of what was the chancel.

So the track of training for life was laid out. As a boy, you learned to sing by using your powerful memory at an age when it is absolutely ripe for learning and recall. You learned to take part in and understand the almost infinite complexities of daily ceremonial, tied as it was to the kaleidoscopic church's liturgical year. Then you were taught to improvise a descant to plainsong – we don't really know how – and then to read music and finally to be able to sight-read the most complex polyphony. Having done all that by the age of around fourteen and your voice starting to lose its top notes you certainly didn't stop singing – that would be such a waste – so as an adolescent singer you dropped down to the contra-tenor part, and perhaps finally settled down to become what we would now call a tenor or bass singer.

By this time, you had also been put into a grammar school and learned to write and speak the Latin you had been singing for several years. If you were particularly promising intellectually, your church might find a patron to give you an exhibition or reward. This was an income to take you through a university course from the age of sixteen or seventeen onwards at one of the many church houses or halls at Oxford or Cambridge.



**Winchester & New College Oxford**

If you had been educated at Winchester college, you would automatically go to its sister foundation at Oxford. (This is the one called 'Winchester College at Oxford', or the New College of St Mary.)



**Eton and King's colleges**

If you went to Eton college you would almost certainly attend the King's university foundation at Cambridge.

At the age of eighteen, our now young man could choose between various careers.

**Ulcombe college, Kent**



**14<sup>th</sup> century singers**

He might enter a monastery as a singing monk. He might choose to start training for the priesthood, especially if he already had experience since the age of sixteen as a sub-deacon of singing the lessons and epistles at offices and masses. In which case, he could be further ordained as a deacon at the age of twenty and finally as priest at twenty-four. One might ask why there was such a gap, of four precious years, between being a deacon and priest?

The answer to this is partly that deacons were much in demand, as were any number of young men in minor orders. There were many jobs to do around any church. Deacons and sub-deacons, well-trained in reading and writing Latin, would have the pick of them. If they competed for places in the greater churches, they would need to have these skills, because one of the tests we know about was to sing the epistles and gospels correctly. If the greasy pole of the court attracted them, or the idea of travel on diplomatic service appealed to them, then their training and their knowledge of Latin, the international language, was of huge value to them.

So we see that induction into the daily life of the church and a boy's early musical training meant he had many options for the course of his future life. By the age of fourteen he had been schooled in just the elements of Latin, and might then be apprenticed as a tradesman in one of the arts associated with the church and great houses. These would include designing and carrying out carving in stone and wood, glass painting, frescoes, alabaster, clocks and vestments, or making the mechanisms and pipework of organs - and ultimately the design of churches, both large and small. Most of these crafts are directly associated with music, so it would not be surprising if a trained musician was involved with this sort of work. It would have been logical for a trained musician also to be involved in the design and construction of chancels themselves, because these eventually had to accommodate a large range of equipment as well as being acoustically and spatially suitable for the performance of the liturgy.

Within the church's own hierarchy, a singer would have had to choose by the age of eighteen whether to remain a lay person (although still in minor orders) to do the job of a lay-clerk singer or, in larger establishments where there were canons or prebendaries, as a lay vicar-choral. These vicars choral were the quire substitutes for the senior clergy of the third form, and they might sing alongside ordained minor canons. In many establishments, as we have seen, boys were trained as organ players too. It is clear that this extra qualification could lead to high lay office, as trainers of major choirs, even monastic ones. What they were taught to play was the same as they had been taught to sing - that is: improvisation on the plainchant. So when a trained singer played the organ alternately with the other singers in lengthy services, so what he improvised naturally followed the style of the sung music which he also knew very well. As a result, its players became composers once they had learned to write down the best of what they had improvised. These were the composers so admired by their European contemporaries and they were the founders of written English music.

By the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, lay composer-organ players were in charge of the professional choirs set up around then to sing in the new or rebuilt Lady Chapels of the greater churches. This was Leonel Power's semi-retirement job in the then newly-built Lady Chapel near the martyrdom within Canterbury's monastic priory-cathedral. The major secular colleges, including the royal foundations, all competed with the royal chapels to obtain the services of the finest players and singers. Towards the end of the golden era they competed with ducal chapel choirs and those of the major prince-bishops and archbishops and cardinals as well.

Those who chose the ecclesiastical path could hope one day to become succentor and then precentor in a great church or cathedral.

Gloucester Abbey



Milton Abbey



**Abbot on the south; Precentor on the north**

The precentor, one has to remind oneself, was in every case the second highest officer in a major establishment, being always the deputy of the dean or warden. He was also responsible for the choir's performance in all its aspects. He chose the boys and men at voice trials, and appointed one or more of them to be organ players. He was responsible in every way for the daily provision of music, whether in the abstract or physical, actual sense – and with the chancellor he looked after the written music books and saw to the maintenance of the organs. The precentor supervised the musical performance of the service from his stall at the west end of the choir and so he was able to call defaulters to account for themselves. He was also the chief celebrant-singer at the high altar masses on the highest holy feast days.

Next below him in the hierarchy was the chancellor, whose jobs – if he did not delegate some of them – included the repair of music,



**Service rota 'table' at Gloucester abbey**

the assignation of the multifarious tasks of liturgists and singers at all services and the proper and sufficient funding of these activities. These two men, precentor and chancellor, were central to the church's mission of providing, seven whole days a week, the highest musical excellence in the perpetual embellishment of God's service, as they would put it.

The colleges founded by senior ecclesiastics such as Thomas Scott, archbishop of York,



**Rotherham, home town of Thomas Scott**

in his home town of Rotherham, or Henry Chichele,



**Chichele's college at Higham Ferrers**

archbishop of Canterbury in his place of origin at Higham Ferrers in Northamptonshire, are practical proof that these men themselves went through the same system,



**Winchester college**

as had William of Wykeham, bishop of Winchester before them. They wanted to give the youth of their home towns the same or better opportunities that they had been given. It has been calculated that by the 1530s there was a grammar school for every 7000 persons in the population, and even this figure does not include all the by-then around 200 local colleges with their wide range of educational possibilities. Such a widespread educational provision was not to be equalled, either numerically or proportionately, until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

It is perhaps well known that a challenge between Henry VIII and Thomas cardinal Wolsey to see whose choir was the finer was won by Wolsey's choir. This was on the basis of their superior sight-singing, the other skills – including improvisation and complex polyphony - presumably being almost taken for granted! It was probably not politic for Wolsey to have won, perhaps ... but the possibility of such a contest shows what a high level of musical excellence had been reached. It also shows the commitment of Wolsey to musical performance. Not surprising perhaps, since he was probably himself musically educated at the then recently-founded Magdalen College in Oxford under the patronage of the Duchess of Suffolk

Almost the only major testament left to us of the polyphonic anthem (or antiphon as it was called then) is what is left of the Eton Choirbook. This is a compilation made towards the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century of music by composers from over the whole country for use in the then new royal college chapel at Eton. This college had been founded by Henry VI and built and completed by his successor kings along with the King's college at Cambridge, its sister college. The scope and energy of the music in the Eton Choirbook collection is amazing. It sounds sometimes like a slightly bizarre late-romantic ensemble opera and at others like a choral version of the sounds of a great organ – which indeed in some ways it almost certainly was, given the close ties between singers and organ-player/composers.

But in fact this is not the music that impressed the French that I mentioned earlier. That was the music that was being written, also from the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, for fully-polyphonic masses to be sung (usually) in Lady Chapels. This was music composed, for the first time ever, on a symphonic scale. These settings of the propers of the mass are linked thematically and can take up to 25 minutes to perform in total. In a medieval mass of the Salisbury rite, the usual one in England and Wales, the bulk of the music for the mass is actually sung almost continuously during the service, together with additional antiphons according to the status of the day concerned. Music for the Lady Mass was sung in a place usually and where possible built apart from the rest of the church – of which the finest late example is the glorious Lady Chapel at Gloucester Abbey.



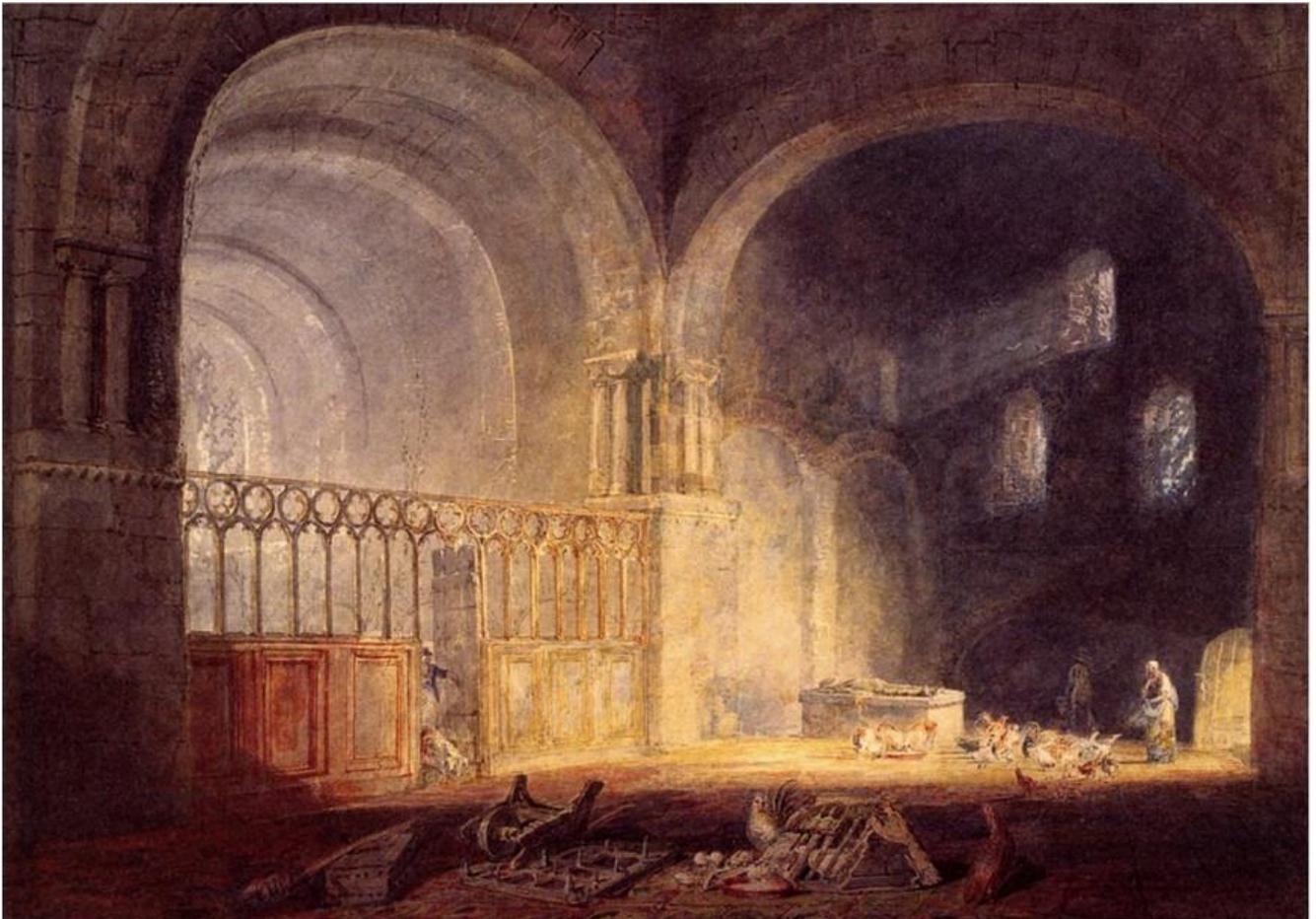
**Gloucester abbey: Lady chapel**

This was finished around 1500 and features two high side galleries and a raised western gallery for musicians designed into it from the start. The potential for amazing musical effects is mouth-wateringly obvious. How many other late-medieval Lady Chapels were equipped in this way we can't be sure because many of them were demolished later on, as at Norwich, for instance. I'm not forgetting of course the beautiful but much earlier Lady Chapel at Ely, but it is obvious that its resonant acoustics were not designed for the same sort of spacial poly-antiphony available to the singers at Gloucester. The choirs that sang these Lady masses also sang the Lady Vespers at least once a week. These were long and elaborate, and only such later works as the Vespers by Monteverdi can give us any idea now of their scale and extent – and these Lady vespers were just one part of an ongoing daily repertory.

The history of the involvement and at times the non-involvement of boys in the choirs of major churches over the whole medieval period is a complicated one. If Dr Roger Bowers was speaking today instead of me, as originally planned, he might have unravelled all that, but it's enough for me to say that from the later 14<sup>th</sup> century their involvement was continuous and ever more demanding. And that therefore a ready supply of musicians was available for the two thousand or so major churches, colleges, hospitals, private chapels, monasteries and indeed nunneries (who also trained their own musicians, we should not forget) throughout Britain.

It may have occurred to you, listening to all this, that the later medieval church was a very different thing from anything we have today, of whatever denomination. It may of course be possible to exaggerate the real extent of a musically-trained priesthood, by suggesting that although this reached right up to musically-trained prelates, deans, precentors and wardens, it also reached down to the villages as well. However, my feeling is that, in our research visits to now around 800 churches in order to look for and find their musical infrastructure, we have been only scraping the surface, as it were. We have in fact found significant signs of their inherently musical design in almost every church. The only problem seems to be that no-one has ever looked for these signs before. Their presence definitely changes that way in which a medieval church needs to be assessed.

We have to emphasise that our research could only have been carried out in England and Wales. With the introduction of the first Book of Common Prayer in 1549,



**William Turner: Ewenny Priory**

chancels here were more or less abandoned except for the second part of very occasional communion services. Whereas everywhere else in north-west Europe, the effects of the counter-Reformation set into action by the Council of Trento (in what is now northern Italy) were far-reaching, with drastic changes made to chancels and their equipment. In England and Wales, chancels, except for a brief return to normal under Mary and Philip, had already been emptied of their moveable riches by the time the Council of Trento ended. So we can now go along and pick up the traces of what was there before the 1540s, except where these have been obliterated by Victorian clergy and their architects keen to restore their chancels on, ironically, the Tridentine model.



Early 20<sup>th</sup> century



Since 1948

### Post-Tridentine monasticism

This was the only model they seemed to know anything about, but we need not be complacent about this: I can't emphasise enough how different the daily life of the medieval church in this country was from the Roman church of the present time.

We have been looking at churches with new eyes as places of work and music. This explains so much of what we see.



Ickham

### 'Singing chancel' with lancet windows

To give only a few examples: the proportions of the buildings are designed to be suitable acoustically for the plainchant music sung in them when they were built.



Swanscombe



Boston



St Nicholas at Wade



Adderbury



Westebere



Lawford

### Replaced or built with later, bigger windows

New larger windows were installed when music that has to be read enters the repertoire alongside memorised plainchant.

We are also finding low windows at the west end of the chancel, usually only on the south side which seem to have been placed for the priest or clerks to sing Matins at day-break.



Sopley



Brampton



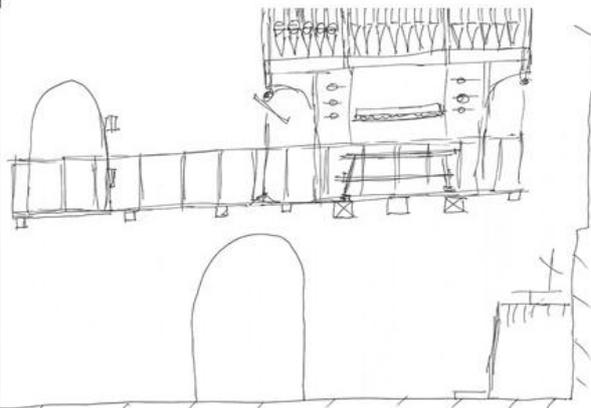
Chesham



Gamlingay

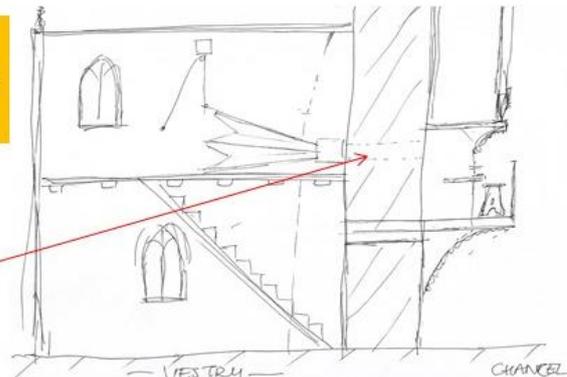
### Low windows to light music at Matins

We have found where organs and their often cumbersome and noisy bellows were placed



Stoke by Clare Inventory of 1534:  
It'm An other payer standing in ye quere of organs  
Another organ raised up in the chancel

Wind trunk hole at Dennington



**A suggested position for some medieval organs**

and now how have some idea of how and when rood lofts really were used liturgically – or not.

Dartmouth, Devon, St Saviour:  
wide eastern access



Newark-on-Trent, Notts: wide platform  
with eastern organ extension



- but more commonly as at Wing, Bucks:  
narrow & steep western access



**Rood lofts used liturgically – or not?**

As I mentioned before, every church solved the problems posed by developing liturgies and more complex music and ceremonial in their own individual ways, but the underlying pattern is clear. What is interesting and exciting – and totally unpredictable – is how much every community was involved in

this embellishment of the liturgy, and how willingly they accommodated these changes. What is certain is that an important part of the history of a thousand years of personal musical development training and expertise is to be found, documented in stone and wood, in these buildings.

More than that – this is the root system even for churches of the reform, for the training of the Handel family, the multifarious Bachs. In the still-catholic southern Europe, it was the system for the Haydn and Mozart families as well. And down to the near-present for many of us too. It was also the foundation for all the music that followed during and after the process of reformation. English music did not spring fully formed out of nothing in the later Tudor period, during the long reign of the first Elizabeth, despite the impression we are given by most music historians. This was anyway a period so socially and economically disastrous that on its own it could never have produced Tallis or Byrd. Shakespeare for example was a student at the town grammar school, as we all know, but this was nothing new: it had originally been founded by the college set up in Stratford on Avon's parish church two hundred years before. He and his contemporaries were the inheritors, as well, of a system of education in the broadest sense, of mental and physical training, and of the inculcation of an aspiration to do the best possible at all times - seven whole days not one in seven...

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We are also inheritors of the crumbs of music that have dropped from the table of this long, thousand-year, history. Are we going now to leave them for dogs to lick them up just as they did from 1547 to 1549? Then, the whole idea of music in church was not only under attack by reformers, but had been for some time. On Christmas day in 1547 an Order of Council was made with the approval of Archbishop Thomas Cranmer for the deliberate destruction of the whole written repertoire of the music and liturgy of the church. This was followed the next year by a draconian Act of Parliament which ordered churches to take all their music and liturgical books to the local bishops to be destroyed – burnt usually - under pains of heavy fines and even imprisonment. This destruction took place just after the funding basis of the entire collegiate system was stolen when chantries were robbed of their lands and support. Largely as a result of this came the destruction of most of the educational system as well, when chantry schools and the almshouse-hospitals were all shut down. Education practically ceased then, even if a handful of grammar schools, including Shakespeare's at Stratford, were rescued later on by local action or influence at court.



**Howden Minster's empty ruined chancel**

It is really surprising that the terrible loss of music from 1547 to 1549 associated with the introduction of the first book of common prayer has hardly appeared in histories up to now, or at the very least has not been given the prominence and emphasis it deserves. Perhaps that is because most historians are not musicians, so do not understand the serious, mortal, impact this had. Nor are musicians aware of some of these vital aspects of political history either. But the fact is that the voluminous music that had appeared in massive inventories made in the later 15<sup>th</sup> century had completely disappeared by the time of the inventories made of every church under Edward VI three years later in the early 1550s. The Prayer Books of 1549 and 1552 themselves were also, incidentally, introduced with draconian measures against those who perhaps did not have either the heart or inclination to use them.

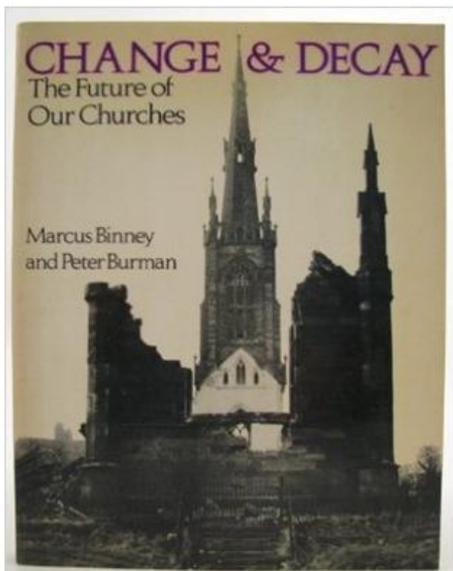
If Edward had survived much longer, the chain of music in England would probably have been broken irrevocably. As it happened, the previous system, or a major part of it, was re-established by Mary just long enough for resistance to begin to develop. This was to some extent able to inhibit further drastic or rapid change under Elizabeth, despite an influx of evangelical bishops returning from exile in towns under Calvinist influence when she came to the throne. Mary's short reign and the fifteen or so years it took for the so-called Elizabethan settlement to take hold were just long enough for those musicians trained under the old system, of whom Tallis was the senior, to sustain some expertise in those small parts of musical repertory that survived. What remained was slight enough, a mere thread: just the cathedral choir schools and those, mostly larger, churches which for some local reason were protected against evangelical change. It took another hundred years for all music to cease in churches, worn down first by evangelical and then by puritan attacks. Music and education were also further ravaged by terrible economic conditions. Finally, in 1644 an Act of Parliament aimed to rid churches of all the vestiges of 'popish' infrastructure that were somehow still left in them. These included holy water stoups, organs and even fonts. This was swiftly followed by the abolition of the Church of England itself, not to be restored for 16 years.

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Now again the old, tried and tested ways of doing things, based on 1500 years of experience, are being changed by people who have little knowledge of what they are dealing with. Music in churches as elsewhere is under pressure from musically-untrained and historically-illiterate people who have no personal experience of its education-for-life value. They are acting with the collusion of the hierarchy of the church and in sympathy with a government patently uninterested in anything culturally valuable. It took about fifteen years, as I said just now, for most of the medieval system to be destroyed, abandoned and forgotten in the first part of Elizabeth's reign.

We are about half-way down a similar fifteen-year time-line now. What will save the present system now is not clear, but something more effective than scratching heads and evoking nostalgia seems to be needed. I wonder if anyone who is intent on demolition has yet been told in clear terms to stop long enough to understand fully what they are destroying? There is also a current threat against those rural churches that were once so full of music and life. If they are designated 'festival churches', they will become empty landscape follies with a history and *raison d'être* that almost everyone has already forgotten. They will surely be followed by many other churches, in towns as well as the countryside, and there are already worrying signs of this too. We have collectively forgotten the extent and importance of music in the middle ages, and that churches can be so quickly emptied of their life, so how much more easily will the practice and cultivation of music itself disappear from public consciousness now? Knowledge of what went before is the most valuable weapon against present ignorance.

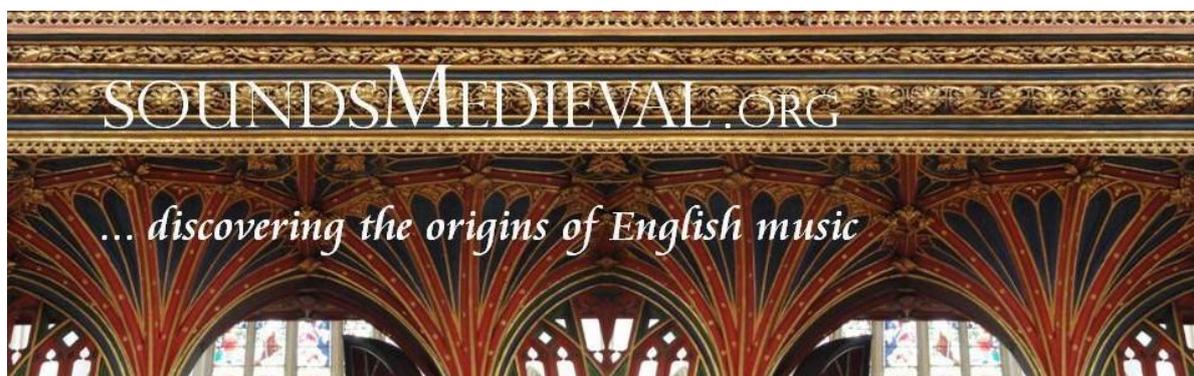
Will seven whole days finally become seven hollow days?



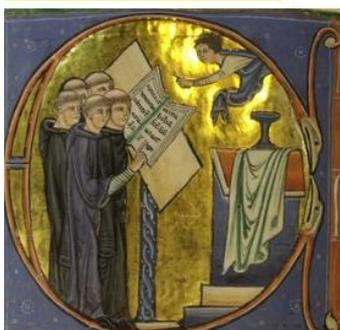
### Change and Decay?

2017 is the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the famous exhibition 'Change and Decay' mounted by Roy Strong and Save Britain's Heritage. I wonder if in these last forty years we have learned that change does not have to be accompanied by decay if handled with intelligent and knowledgeable resistance?

Most of all, church musicians need to be provided with strategies - ways which will help them preserve and enhance the extraordinary heritage they have received. But who will provide these strategies? Do lessons for these lie in the history of music in our churches and other institutions? We could have started by reminding old Etonian politicians of the reasons for the foundation of their now-so privileged collegiate school! Or by celebrating the achievements of well-known figures such as Alistair Cook, who became the youngest person ever to achieve 10,000 runs in international cricket. He attributes his powers of concentration in long test matches to his early training as a chorister at St Paul's.



Worcester fragments



Fairford



York Minster



Italian c1420





The last of these photographs, from Chester cathedral's west door, show singers and organists hard at work five hundred years ago – may they long continue to do so!

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