

I NEVER KNEW THAT!

The Origins of English Cathedral Choirs

Peter Giles

CTCC has been sending copies of *Clarion Call* to cathedrals and major foundations that still have traditional choirs; or just about. We had an almost immediate warm and friendly response from a member of the clergy of a parish church cathedral. We thank him for his reply, though it revealed some troubling misunderstanding about the cathedral tradition and its music, especially in the parish church cathedrals.

It therefore seems a good idea to look at the origins of cathedral choirs in England and address thereby some misconceptions about the subject. We should remember, too, that the three other countries of the British Isles possessed similar ancient foundations with traditional choirs, and that a few have survived, however tenuously. Sadly, the traditional choirs are confined now to a few foundations in Wales and Ireland. Being armed with the following facts should make it easier for the reader to talk knowledgeably and confidently about the English cathedral tradition and its precious heritage of specialist music. The foundations have been dated as closely and accurately as has been found possible.

Pre-Conquest and mediaeval ecclesiastical foundations gave birth to our present cathedral choirs. These communities and their systems in abbeys, priories, cathedrals and other collegiate foundations, constituted a huge, nation-wide network of 'powerhouses' for daily sung and said prayer. These foundations were to radiate – singly and collectively – a spiritual energy that would attract and link with the unimaginable spiritual power of the Almighty. Thus their purpose was mainly to offer unceasing worthy worship to God and to supplicate on behalf of humanity – to pray daily for all people everywhere. This spiritual *raison d'être* can be recognised as surviving today – albeit on a vastly reduced scale – even in our secularised, materialistic, totally changed society.

Other aims of these mediaeval and earlier foundations were to educate boys towards the future supply of priests; to ensure that those not headed for the priesthood receive an intense Christian schooling; and to promulgate the Faith systematically.

The following information may be over-simplified for some readers, but it should answer a few questions frequently asked by others. I am indebted to Martin Renshaw for some valuable input – mainly the indented, italicised sections – based on his current research into music in English churches before the Reformation.

There are twenty-six major ancient Anglican cathedral foundations in England, many of them dating from well before the Norman Conquest. They fall into three main historical categories. Added to these are three major new cathedrals and thirteen parish church cathedrals.

(A) Old Foundation or 'secular'

St Paul's (604), York (c. 669), Lincoln (628/1092), Hereford (c. 676/ 825), Lichfield (700), Exeter (1050), Chichester (1075), Salisbury (1092/1219), Wells (c.1175)

The dates above refer to (1) The establishment of the bishop's *cathedra* on that site or nearby, and (2) The apparent start as a fully functioning cathedral, with a corporate, collegiate life 'semi-independent' of its bishop. I cannot find a second date for the first two foundations.

Old Foundation cathedrals are called 'secular' (i.e. non-monastic) as opposed to 'religious' (i.e. monastic) because they were never served by monks but by a dean, canons, prebendaries and vicars-choral. Some of the latter were, and still are, 'priest vicars' (ordained men who are also singers) and others 'lay-vicars' (non-ordained, specialist, professional singing men).

The two varieties of vicars-choral constituted the men of the choir. Their title meant that they acted vicariously (i.e. as statutory substitutes) for the dean and canons but especially for geographically distant prebendaries at the up-to-eight pre-Reformation daily offices. These services had been sung from the establishment of the Foundation as a fully operational collegiate unit. Some services included boys from the cathedral's own school or who were taught by a vicar-choral or a canon. In York and one or two other northern cathedrals and collegiate churches the men of the choir have long since lost their higher title of lay-vicar and become 'songmen'.

In these secular cathedrals, the precentor was, and is, a senior canon on the chapter – usually ranked second after the dean. This, the origin of *Decani* and *Cantoris*: Dean's side and Precentor's side: demonstrates the huge importance attached to the music. Many of these cathedrals have a Succentor – a priest-vicar who sings permanently in place of the Precentor.

After Henry VIII's break with Rome in the 1530s, the full *Opus Dei* of daily services continued: still sung by this same choir of men and boys. It seems that till the death of Henry in 1547, and possibly even till 1549, Chapel(s) Royal, cathedral and collegiate church services were not sung in English: the use of Latin music was retained.

The cloisters extant at some of these Old Foundation cathedrals have always served simply as splendid, covered walkways. Cloisters were of course more than this in monastic cathedrals:

(B) New Foundation or 'monastic'

(i) Canterbury (595/1540), Rochester (c. 604/1540), Winchester (645/1540), Ely (673/1541), Durham (c.998/1541), Norwich (1094-6/1540), Carlisle (1123/1540); plus, briefly, Westminster Abbey (origin 600-700/a cathedral between 1540-1550)

The dates above refer to (1) Seeming establishment of the foundation as a priory on that site, and (2) Conversion to a single function as a secular cathedral.

(ii) Peterborough (c.655/1541), Worcester (680/1540), Gloucester (681/1541), Oxford (735/1546), Chester (1093/1541), Bristol (1140/1542)

The second date above denotes the total re-founding of the former monastery as a cathedral on the secular model.

Before the Dissolution of the Monasteries in the years around 1540, what later became known as the New Foundation cathedrals [subsection (i)] were monastic and cathedral foundations *in parallel* – a phenomenon peculiar to Roman Catholic England. Though these foundations had a bishop and a diocese, they were served not by a dean and canons, but by a prior and monks. The monks supplied their own choir and the community sang its offices day and night. The very title 'New' Foundation is misleading, in that most of these establishments are as ancient as those named 'Old Foundation' – indeed some are older.

In addition, most of these monastic cathedrals had Lady Chapel men's choirs that, at least from the 1480s onwards, seem to have been exclusively professionalised. They sang music of the extreme complexity characterised in the compilation known as the Eton Choirbook. At the Dissolution, Henry VIII made the monastic cathedrals into secular foundations, served by a dean and canons. Generally, the men constituting the Lady Chapel choir, together with boys from the school, became the – in a sense re-founded – cathedral choir.

Except for the duality in foundations in subsection (i) the same situation obtained in the previously purely monastic foundations [subsection (ii)] that Henry elevated to cathedrals. In all New Foundation cathedrals the round of services continued, though reduced to two per day, exactly as now, too, in the Old Foundation cathedrals. The men of the choirs of the New Foundation were titled 'lay-clerks', professional ecclesiastical singers in similar fashion to the lay-vicars-choral in ancient secular cathedrals. 'Clerks' denotes laymen as opposed to 'clerks in holy orders' (i.e. priests). The

boys usually came from what had been the monastic school. After the Dissolution, it became a choir school; or it was enlarged and often re-named the Cathedral School or King's School). In all New Foundation cathedrals, the precentor was and still is a minor canon, and so is not on the chapter. Given the importance of the music and the position, the reasons for this are not obvious.

It is important to underline that the choirs of all these ancient cathedrals, plus those of Royal chapels, and surviving former Collegiate Foundations nation-wide, sang the full *Opus Dei* – that is, usually eight daily services throughout the year till 1549 – just as they had done before the start of the protracted English Reformation. After 1549, the *Opus Dei* can be said to have continued – emphatically minus any such title – but reduced, with some amalgamation, to daily Morning and Evening Prayer.

(C) Later Phase Cathedrals

Southwark[^] (c.606/1905), Ripon[^] (672/1836), St Albans[^] (c.793/1877), Southwell* (956/1884)

The two dates denote that of the (1) Original foundation (2) Re-founding as a cathedral.

These four mediaeval greater churches had a collegiate* or/and monastic[^] history; but by the 19th century, though Ripon and Southwell had long been used in the vast old York diocese as 'bishopstools', all four of them were being used in effect as parish churches, despite their history and magnificence. Choirs of men and boys existed in them already, though some choirs may have been somewhat run down. This was remedied on their promotion to 'cathedral-hood'. To begin with, the men came 'from the town' and were usually titled lay-clerks. The boys were either from an existing school, or a new one that usually catered for day boys only. These later-phase cathedrals took on the same *Opus Dei* of mostly daily sung services as the longer established cathedrals. The precentor is of canon rank and is on the chapter.

We move now to three more recent, truly major-scaled cathedral foundations, plus thirteen mostly ancient churches made into cathedrals beginning in 1848.

(D) New Cathedrals

Truro[^] (1887/1910), Liverpool* (1910/completed 1961), Guildford* (1936-9/completed 1961)

Two dates denote (1) Foundation (2) Start as a fully functioning cathedral.

These were totally new buildings*, or newly built though incorporating an aisle of an ancient church[^]. All three are designed on traditional cathedral or greater church pattern and scale. New choirs on the traditional model of men and boys were established immediately; though at Guildford, a large town church with its existing traditional choir, did pro-cathedral duty till the new cathedral was finished. In these more recent foundations, the precentor is of canon rank and is on the chapter.

(E) Parish Church Cathedrals

Birmingham, Blackburn, Bradford, Chelmsford, Coventry, Derby, Leicester, Manchester, Newcastle, Portsmouth, St Edmundsbury, Sheffield, Wakefield

Listed alphabetically, thirteen predominantly mediaeval city or town large or sizeable parish churches were made cathedrals between 1848 and 1927. Some have been extended, sometimes impressively, while others remain substantially as they were before promotion. Coventry is a fine iconic 1960s building that replaced the superb mediaeval parish church cathedral destroyed tragically in the Second World War.

While the all-male choral tradition is long and its existence undisputed in all the ancient cathedrals, there is some misunderstanding about the choral tradition in cathedrals originating as parish churches. But what was a parish church? Manchester cathedral, for example, was both parish church and notable collegiate foundation before the Reformation. But it is totally incorrect to assume that others, on their promotion to cathedrals in the 19th or early 20th centuries, started a traditional choir for the

first time in their existence. Like most churches, large and small, nation-wide, at the time these new lesser cathedrals were being created, all parish churches turned cathedrals would have been served already by choirs of men and boys: most of them originating from before the Reformation.

While in some churches an all-male choir had survived the changes of the mid-16th century, from the 1840s, the Oxford Movement resulted in most parish churches across the country restoring or first establishing a choir of men and boys. No doubt the standard of singing varied; though when the new, supplementary cathedrals were created in the 19th and early 20th centuries, promotion into 'the cathedral choir' must have provided a whole new incentive for improvement. But the point is that these choirs were *in situ*. They had a pre-Reformation origin and did not have to be created for the first time. Of course, while these choirs sang more frequently than before 'promotion', not every parish church cathedral could provide sung services absolutely every day. Perhaps appropriate to the markedly secondary status of parish church cathedrals, their precentors are usually one or other of the ordained staff, other than the dean.

Collegiate foundations and their influences

Readers may have been surprised at earlier discussion of ancient non-cathedral churches having had all-male choirs, or choirs of any sort before the Reformation. We have long been directed to believe that choirs were unknown in all parish churches in mediaeval times, and that the first 'choirs' heard at parish level comprised ad-hoc mixed-voice gallery vocalists accompanied by equally ad-hoc instrumentalists during the 18th and 19th centuries. This was far from true - Martin Renshaw, now researching and lecturing invaluablely on the true place of music and organs in English mediaeval parish and collegiate churches, provides us with the following revealing and (to those of you who thought you knew otherwise!) surprising detail: ¹

*At least 150 of today's major (plus some minor) parish churches, the 170 or so colleges and many hospitals [these terms as in mediaeval usage] possessed choirs of men and boys throughout the mediaeval period, up to the mid-16th century and the Reformation. Some continued after the Reformation. What do you think all those extensive, well-lit chancels were designed and built for?*²

Martin, recently become a CTCC member, was one of the last generations of choristers at St Paul's cathedral to be trained free of charge (and was later Cantoris tenor lay-clerk at Canterbury). He continues, comparing the newer cathedrals with the ancient foundations:

The present cathedral 'tradition' appears to be short in those cathedrals created in the last 150 years - but in mediaeval times there was a flourishing, often collegiate(i.e. liturgical and training) system in place in them too, as there was in at least 150 other English parish churches. This system involved choirs of men and boys. And it was free to those being trained throughout their early lives, to the age of 24, when those who had come through the rigorous and highly-structured system had the option if desired of being ordained priest. Most of the clergy, especially those aspiring to high office, would have been trained this way, and it would have been possible for a 6-year old entrant to the choir to aspire to become a cardinal - and indeed Thomas Wolsey was trained in the school of Magdalen College, Oxford! Imagine a [golden!] time when almost all clergy were trained singers; when many were also organ players and absolutely all were expected to sing the daily offices and masses, whether as parish priests or auxiliary chantry (the name gives the game away) priests.... Installed in many churches from the middle of the fifteenth century (and earlier), organs were used to rest the choir who might be singing up to four hours a day. They were played in alternate verses of the chant by one of the singers, specially selected and trained for this work.

Evensong may date from 1549, but compline and vespers are much older! And England was famous throughout Europe for its musical adornment of those rather spare/ascetic choir offices with complex polyphony sung to Our Lady. In many major churches and in both monastic and

secular cathedrals most of the singing was fully professionalised in Lady chapels by around 1480.

Martin's excellent website ² should be visited.

Therefore to sum up, cathedral choirs of men and boys, those of Royal Peculiars and the like, plus important collegiate chapels and churches (originally together with a good number of lesser collegiate foundations) have existed for long centuries. In many pre-Reformation parish churches, and post-Oxford Movement most churches nation-wide, there were traditional choirs. Usually springing from the best category of these, composers, many of them important, have written a huge custom-composed repertoire for this unique all-male choral instrument.

Other than its abolition during the approximately twenty years of the Commonwealth, this tradition has continued unbroken to the present, though the sung daily *Opus Dei* is usually represented by Evensong alone. Unfortunately, in many places and for different though again political reasons, the genuine tradition is threatened anew today. Once gone, there will be little or no likelihood of its being allowed to return.

¹ In a letter to the present writer, March 2014.

² See Martin's website: soundsmedieval.org ; his latest two lectures, which illustrate why chancels were built as they were, are on it now, together with an extensive peer-reviewed recently-published article: 'The place of the organ in the medieval parish church'.

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