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Quires and places where they sang

Part I: Quires

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Good morning. Today we are going to try an experiment. Not just the new one of your listening to me for around 50 minutes in total, with a welcome break between them! It's because I am going to invite you to share an experience which was common 500 years ago, but which seems to have been lost to our folk memory. I am going to take you back into a fairly normal parish church to see what was happening there during part of just one afternoon – to take you into a short medieval 'experience'.

It is the year 1500.



Henry VII

Our king, Henry VII, is pretty well settled on the throne he took by force at the battle of Bosworth. He is now well into his rather paranoid life's work of putting the finances of the country on a firm footing. With his agents, who included Morton, the archbishop of Canterbury, he is making sure that both rich and poor pay their share of taxes –and more than their share if possible. He has also managed to pacify the country, and is using his money to prop up the finances of those foreign enemies who might otherwise be tempted to invade England to get hold of some of his money.

So, let us go into a parish church somewhere in the east of England.



Swineshead, Lincolnshire
Aylemerton, Norfolk



Barking, Suffolk
Melton Mowbray, Leicestershire



Because we are just ordinary people, not ordained even at the lowest level, we have to enter by the south porch, the one most easily accessed from our town.

The church's hour bell has just struck three times, thanks to the mechanism installed quite recently.



St Nicholas, Kings Lynn, Norfolk



Mendelsham, Norfolk

South Porches



Cratfield, Norfolk



Peterborough Cathedral

Mechanical clocks

but the scratched dial on the buttress near the door could have told us the time, perhaps more accurately. At a little after three o'clock, the church is relatively silent, no services being performed until the evening round starts in about an hour's time. Through the open door we can see a small group of people, talking



Kempston, Bedfordshire

Scratch Dial



quietly in the far side of the church. They are probably transacting some business, sitting on benches in the opposite alley. After crossing ourselves with water from the stoup by the door, we enter.



Aylmerton, Norfolk



Llancarfan, Glamorgan



Dean, Bedfordshire

Holy Water Stoups

The first thing we will see is the font with its carvings, its soaring cover and the crane that lifts the cover upwards when there is a christening.



Salle, Norfolk



Cratfield, Norfolk

Font and cover

Otherwise there are only a few bits of furniture around this end of the church: various stools, and some benches by the outer alley walls.



Merchant class:
Cawston, Norfolk



High class:
Newark on Trent,
Nottinghamshire



Rustic:
Brisley, Norfolk

Benches

Sunlight is colouring the brick and tile floor as it passes through the windows of the south alley.



Cawston,
Norfolk



Salle,
Norfolk



Medieval tile and brick floors

It also catches the upper parts of the great screen across the church, highlighting the grapes and leaves on its upper parts.



Patrishow, Powys



Vowchurch, Herefordshire

Kentisbere, Devon



Cullompton, Devon



Rood screen friezes and coving

Light from the high clear-storeys also falls on the front of the balustrade of the rood loft and the coloured and gilded statues of saints standing in it.



Statues on rood screen parapet

Candles and lights in brass basins glow on the parapet and lead our gaze higher towards the focal point of the church.

Eye, Suffolk



Crucifix, Mary, John and angels

This is the huge crucifix – also painted and gilded – and its accompanying statues of Our Lady and John, standing on a wooden hill of gaping skulls and scattered bones.



Golgatha



Cullompton, Devon



Holy Trinity, Coventry, Warwickshire



Houghton Conquest, Bedfordshire

Doomsday

Above and behind these is a fresco of the Last Judgement, with sinners being taken off to our right through the gaping jaws of hell. On our left the reprieved are passing out of their open graves into heaven. We shudder a bit, reflecting on what awaits everyone on that dreadful last day.

But our musings are disturbed by a small man who passes us without a word and then disappears through a door near the bottom of the screen. After a few moments he re-appears on top of it, behind the parapet and its candles. He tops up the basins using a small pitcher of oil and replaces a candle that had burnt nearly right down. With a slam of the door at the top, we can hear him scraping down the spiral steps. He beetles off towards another small door near the south porch. We see his shadow in the window that gives onto the church from the upper storey of the porch.

Mildenhall, Suffolk



Northhill, Bedfordshire



Secure storerooms over porches

Silence again descends and we say some short prayers, and look around some more. We admire once again the carving on the screen and we crane our necks to look at the underside of it.



Cawston,
Norfolk

Upper rood screen detail

Its uprights are bright with tiny pieces of glass and decorated with miniature gold arches. Its lower panels contain figures of saints, some of whom we recognise because of the things they are carrying – a sword for St Paul or keys for St Peter – but others are less easily named, so they have a scroll above them to show who they are. They are local saints or the doctors, the original theologians, of our church.



Litcham, Norfolk

Lower rood panels: saints and theologians

Suddenly there is a burst of activity beyond the screen as the south door in the quire opens and two tonsured, ordained men enter. They are followed by another in simpler dress who passes in front of the altar and goes through another door on the opposite side of the quire beyond the quire-stalls. Then three boys come in, dressed in small versions of the priests' black robes. One of the clerks, after a

short discussion with the other, goes and sits in the nearest stall to the south door while the other climbs a short ladder on the opposite side into the gallery where the organ is. The boys sit down on the low benches in front of the quire stalls.



Walpole St Peter, Norfolk

Boys benches

The priest sitting in the stalls gets out a book from a cupboard behind him and opens it on the desk in front of him. He stands up and looks across the quire towards the organ.

A moment later there is a soft creaking sound followed by some notes on the organ. The first clerk starts to sing and then leaves off, saying to the organ player 'That's too high!' The player responds with the same music a bit lower and the clerk sings a short chant in reply. He stops and says 'We'll stick to that. Can you just try a verse now – not too long, please?' And the organ again plays but this time with some higher notes superimposed over the lower phrase he played earlier. When he stops, the other says, 'That's good, but a bit long. We don't want to be here all night!' 'Very well then, master', the other replies. The organ player comes down from the gallery and crosses the quire towards the clerk called master. The master looks up again towards the organ and raises a finger to his mouth. The two clerks try out another piece of music, this time with the boys, who stand up obediently. They start by singing the same music but then suddenly they sing a higher melody which seems to embellish what the priest-clerks are singing... The master then places the book on a large desk in the middle of the quire.

The clock strikes once for the half hour and again the quire door opens and in come four more clerks. All are wearing thick black cloth, even on this fine day. All six group together, beckoning the boys to join them in the space between the quire stalls and the sanctuary step. Everyone stands there waiting. Moments later, another priest arrives and, bowing to the high altar, goes to his place to our right just beyond the screen doors. He sits down there with his back to us. The others bow together to the altar, turn and come down to take up their places in the stalls, facing each other. Some go in through the far end of the desks and others through a gap in the middle of them. The boys stand in front of their benches, and the organ player goes up to the gallery again. When all have reached their places, they turn to the last man to arrive and bow to him. He

acknowledges them and then nods to the choir master, in a signal to begin the office. This man then looks once more towards the organ. When the organ sounds, he – the cantor or conductor - starts Vespers:

‘Deus, in adiutorium meum intende’ ...

We sit down, having pulled up some small loose benches, and listen to the office. There are two psalms, one quite long, and in the longer piece the organ plays in turn while the singers rest. At the end of the office, the player comes down and joins his fellows on the left-hand side of the quire. All the singers rise and turn to the senior man, bow, and then leave their places to stand facing the altar behind the large music-desk in the middle of the choir.

They start to sing a melodious piece which seems to be addressed to Our Lady, because we can hear the word ‘Regina’ quite clearly being passed around the voices, as it were.... When this is finished, the master closes the music book. He carries it back to its cupboard while the others leave the quire by the south door. The boys chatter as they pass through the churchyard towards their house. The bellows operator follows at a respectful distance.

Soon after this, the clock strikes four times. With a last look around, we leave the church. The sun is still quite high, but the ale-house door is open and we can see the bellows man’s broad back as he goes in ...

This picture is drawn on the results of our researches in the midlands and the east of England. However, if we had been in the west country, west of Gloucestershire and Hampshire (or in Brittany) around the same year, 1500, various things would have been different. Our researches there are not yet complete enough to be sure of everything, but many differences are already clear.

For a start, the buildings themselves are designed differently. Generally they do not have chancel arches, and very frequently the aisles (or ‘alleys’ as they were called then were nearly as high and usually as long as the nave and chancel.

Churchwardens’ accounts, Trull (Somerset) c1527

Item to Morcombe for mendyng off the alys ij s viij d

Item [paid] to Morcombe for repairing the alleys 2s 8d

Their dividing arcades run continuously from one end of the church to the other. Clerestories are rarer too. The rood screen, though, with its associated side screens to the quire or other chapels, are very important features, definitely not just ornaments. They divide up the building into its various working areas, and therefore play a vital role. Where they were allowed to survive, they are among the most glorious in England.

Secondly, we have not found any widespread evidence of the double-storey organ bellows room arrangement found in those parts of England that are east of a line from Gloucester to Salisbury. The position of the organs in what I'll call for convenience 'the south-west' seems mostly to have been dependent on the screens and their lofts. The evidence for this is partly documentary, and partly because it is difficult to see where else they might have been placed. We will come back to the documentary aspect this afternoon, but let us now explore these west country churches also as they were about 1500, to see how different our experience there might have been. Let us go back in imagination again to the year 1500, but this time we are somewhere in Devon ...

The people's church, when we enter it, will be familiar in many respects – it also has the porch, font and benches we are used to – but in front of us now is a long screen and its loft.

Kentisbeare



Uffculme

Long Devon screens

This stretches right across the church from its north to south walls, running under an arch which is higher than the others in the nave arcades to allow enough head-height for an easy and straight passage all the way along it.



Broad Clist, Devon

Higher easternmost nave arch

The screen is highly ornamented and coloured, and its balustrades consist of panels with painted saints, angels and flower patterns. In the centre, as usual, are the tall crucifix, flanked by statues of a weeping Mary and a stoic John, with angels above them and skulls and bones beneath. The morrow and Jesus mass altars are, also as usual, set at each side of the rood screen door. There is extra colour and ornamentation in the coving that covers them.

In the side alleys beyond the screens there are more altars, flanking the high altar in the sanctuary beyond the quire. And if our visit had been made in the morning, we would have seen priests there and possibly a group of relatively well-dressed folk by one of the screens, where there are special altars, endowed with funds from various groups of workers or merchants. One of these altars, beyond the north end of the screen, is certainly well-endowed with funds because there is an organ sitting on the screen looking like a swallow with its wings out.

Swallow on its nest



South Pickenham, Norfolk

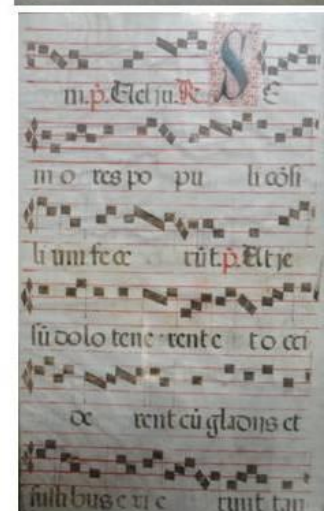
Its pipes face down into the church - and if we could have seen them, more pipes face towards the altar as well. On its wings are more paintings; not of saints this time, but of nativity scenes. Its central pinnacle soars out of sight into the roof space.

Just beyond the screen are seats for the clergy and singers, as we would expect, but there is no organ high up on a gallery in the sanctuary, as far as we can see. But, turning to look across the sanctuary to our left, we do see an organ. It is standing on a loft about the same height as the rood-loft between the quire stalls and the north altar area. It is larger than the one in the side alley, and we can easily see its keyboards and stop-levers. There must be a stairway to get up there, but we can't see it; it must be the far side of the organ loft.

It happens that we have come here on the eve of the feast of St Catherine, the patron saint of the tinworkers' guild. Just like in the other church, about mid-afternoon, there is sudden activity in the quire, as priests and boys arrive. There are more of both of these than in the previous church, and it seems that the boys have a master with them who is not dressed in choir robes. They bow towards the high altar. Another youth, also not in choir robes, goes up into the organ loft, following one of the robed singers and then going to the far end of the organ. One of the singers, bowing as he steps up into the sanctuary, goes to a book-press near the priests' seats, unlocks its door and brings out a large brown leather-bound book. Taking it to the music desk in the middle of the quire, he opens it. He looks for a particular page, licking his fingers as he turns what seem like heavy and large sheets of parchment or vellum.

Music for group singing

Swaffam, Norfolk



The boys and singers then stop milling about and go to the music desk. One of the singers looks up towards the organ and a few moments later a note is heard, followed by several others which are all held together for a moment then released.

This time, the music they are rehearsing is not the quite simple and melodious song to Our Lady we heard in the other church, but something much more complicated. Its opening chords sound like an organ, being full and sonorous. They all sing: 'Salve Regina' ... and then suddenly it is much lighter, with just two or three strands of music sung by higher single voices: 'mater misericordiae' ... and then there are echoes, as it were, from three lower voices: 'Vita dulcedo et spes nostra'... and finally it ends with all voices, singing 'Salve ...' ... It sounds wonderful to us, but clearly the chief singer is not completely happy. He tells one of the adult singers to watch him more carefully when they perform it during the office. He also cuffs a young lad, saying that he should learn to keep still when he sang and not distract the other boys by jigging up and down. I felt sorry for the poor boy. He was scarcely tall enough to see the music at all, and was probably just trying to get a glimpse of it now and again. The master of the quire finishes by telling them all to get some fresh air and a beaker of water before coming back in - at four o'clock sharp! The boys, most of them remembering to bow as they go out, rush off to their school house. Their master follows, calling out that they should 'save their strength for later'.

The organ player meanwhile has found his organ book and placed it on a desk near the keyboards. When the anthem has been rehearsed, and the others had gone, he signals to the youth at his side to begin.



British Museum MS 62925, f.97 c1260

Bellows and operator

The boy gets up from his bench and pulls down a lever attached by a cord to a bellows by the far side of the organ. The bellows opens up and he lets go of the lever carefully. These bellows start to go down. Waiting a short moment, he does the same to another lever, also attached by a cord to another bellows, and so he opens this one up too. As the bellows start to go down, the organ player starts to touch the lower keyboard. A sound like the start of the anthem comes from the organ, slow-moving, full and sonorous ... then, by moving to the upper keyboard, he produces the same sort of lighter sound as the single singers. Pushing to one side two of the stops, he redescends to the lower keyboard and plays solemnly for a while. At the end of this, the organ sounding all the time with a continuous low note, he pushes three of the stops and after a short pause he finishes with a grand and festive sound. Some of this music seems like the sung music – complicated but tuneful in its way. It is a strange mixture of slow and fast notes, all sounding in long phrases or breaths.

When he finishes, and they are coming down the steps, we can just hear him having a few words with the youth. He tells him to be careful not to 'let the wind out' (as he puts it) when the low note is sounding, even if he might think the piece is finishing then. And they leave the church, going through the chancel door through which they entered.

Silence redescends ... until a few minutes later, at four o'clock, the office starts with a solemn procession through the door. Bowing to the altar and the sacrament in the pyx suspended above it, those rumbustuous boys glide quietly and reverently into their seats in front of the men's stalls ...

This talk has used pictures drawn from our research in 300 churches and a few of the 22,000 photographs taken in them. If the church was part of one of the 170 colleges, then no doubt the ceremony would have been more complex. It would be sung by the college boys and their tutors in front of their servants and visitors. In a secular cathedral, most of the music would by this date (1500) have been even more complex, and sung by the choral vicars who stood in for the canons. Much of it would have been polyphonic, especially (in England) at High Mass - and at Vespers. In a monastic cathedral, the service would have consisted of plainchant sung by the monks. There, the more complex music of the evening Lady office was sung in the Lady chapel by professional singers, some not ordained. But what I have described this morning could also have taken place in one of many major parish churches, and other more minor ones, where there was a musical foundation: a school for song and grammar, as it was often called.

The whole church in England resounded with music. And this afternoon I am going to explain why and how this was the case.