

1300-1660: Filling-in the Gap

Martin Renshaw

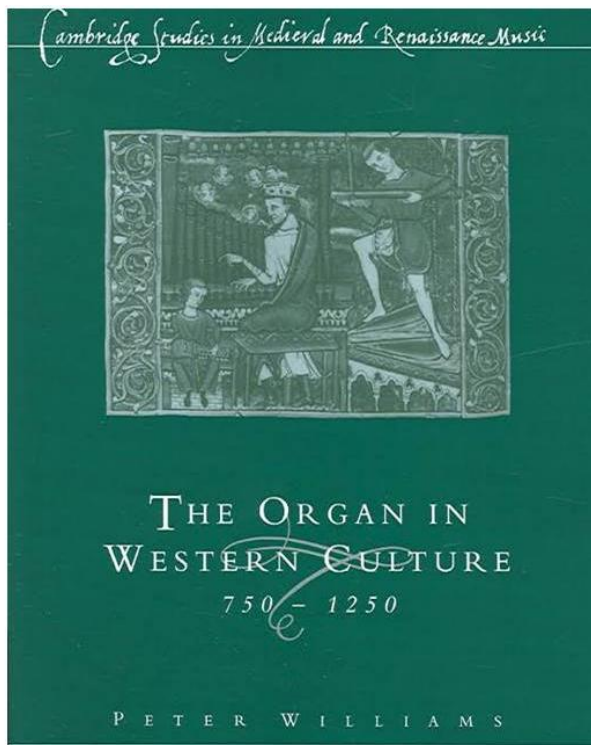
Bernard Edmonds Recent Research Conference

British Institute of Organ Studies

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Ten years ago I gave a talk here – no power point in those days, just some maps – about the re-introduction of organs into churches in England and Wales until 1820, when there were (I think I said) about 720 churches with organs. When I'd finished, Peter Williams said something like 'Well, that's fine, but how many organs were there in churches in 1500? ' If only he knew what he started then – but of course, perhaps he did!



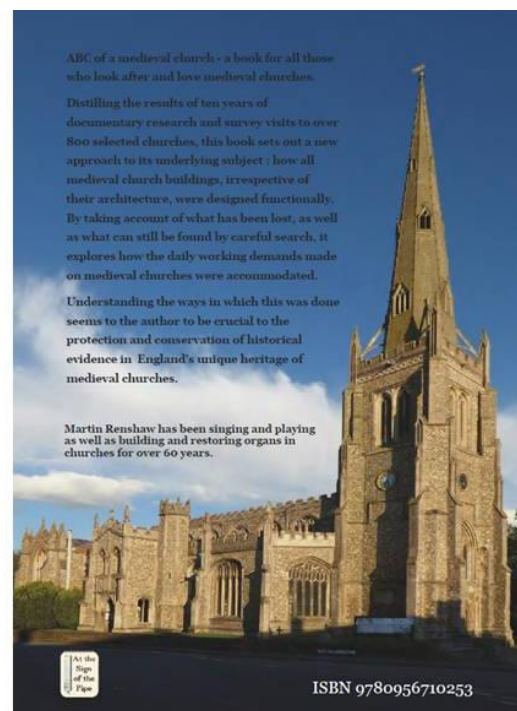
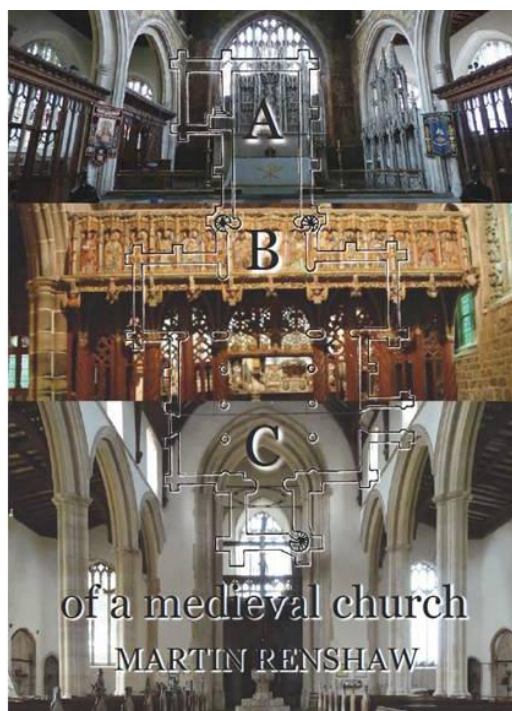
In a lecture here six years ago, Vicki and I revealed some of our early finds. Completely by accident, in 2011 and 2012, we had stumbled on discoveries in five Suffolk churches. All of these proved to have substantial archaeological signs of their organ galleries - or 'lofts' as they were called in the C15 and C16 - and in one of them Vicki found half an actual medieval organ gallery. At that point, a year after the first discoveries, we realised that my documentary researches had better be backed up by research in the churches themselves, which we then started to do systematically. The Society of Antiquaries, with Dr David Shuker as our referee, gave us an expenses grant for 2013-14. By the end of that year's work we were able to report substantial progress and were awarded grants for a further two years, 2015-16, now with Dr Nigel Saul, a fellow of that Society, as referee. This enabled us to achieve our target of visiting around 800 medieval churches all over England

and Wales. This represents about 10% of them, most of them selected because there is documentary evidence for later-medieval music in them. In March last year we gave our 'thank you' lecture to the fellows of the Society of Antiquaries. This lecture is still available on You Tube; it sums up what we have been and are doing.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tBRgNRc1ntQ>

For some time those of us interested in our heritage of medieval churches, and the amazing things to be found in them, have been waiting for the Taylor Report on the Sustainability of Churches and Cathedrals. This was finally delivered to the DCMS department on 20th December 2017. The problems that the current steep decline in church-going present for the future of churches and the organs they contain are certainly of great concern, not least to the members of our Institute and other heritage societies.



My contribution to what I think needs to be a wide and deep debate following the Taylor Report was written in France in the first half of January. Its publication

today has been timed to coincide with the tenth anniversary of that fateful and fruitful question from Peter Williams in 2008. It's a short book which distils in I hope easily-digestible form some of the results of the past ten years' research in documents and in churches. I hope you will buy a copy and enjoy reading it – I can pretty well guarantee that it contains information about churches and organs you had never suspected. And I need hardly say that the 'ABC' of the title is not the ABC you might expect!

It will be followed up by three more books, the first of which is in preparation for a publisher. This is an extensive exploration of the music and education of the medieval church as revealed by our research. The other two books are – as Mozart said about his symphonies – up here in my head, but not yet written down.

One will be a book of detailed case studies of about 30 churches. The other is – well, really, the same as the subject of this talk today: the organ in England and Wales from around 1300 to 1660, and how we might be able credibly to fill in the gaps in our knowledge of what went on during those three and a half centuries. This takes up the story of the organ from where Peter left it in his 'The Organ in Western Culture' ...

The two pillars of our research were documents and churches.

We have learned that documents are not enough on their own, but that neither are medieval churches, as we now find them, mainly because all have been altered, some much more than others. When visiting churches you never know what you might find. Some churches have preserved far more indicators of their medieval furnishings and general set-up than others. But some have been so thoroughly and badly treated as to be almost barren, with scarcely any useful evidence. As regards research using documents, the first great difficulty is to know where to start ; and as far as documents went, I definitely did not start in the right places. With any new subject it takes time to build up enough background, to find the context, against which you can position and evaluate the importance of any discoveries.

Perhaps the widest context is that intangible thing called *Zeitgeist*, the 'air of the times'. How would we characterise the *Zeitgeist* of the C14, C15 and early C16? We call these the late middle ages, though they are also sometimes, confusingly I think, called the early modern age. Both names suggest that since Darwin, whose theories we have mangled into a false idea of continuous progress, we wrongly assume that anything that happened before was primitive, crude and – especially in respect of religion – unenlightened.

Although it's all too easy to over-romanticise the past, it does seem from church wardens' accounts (CWA) that most medieval church people were deeply implicated both mentally and physically in everything that went on in their part of the church as a matter of community pride – and no doubt of their own self-esteem as well.

They were in fact positively invited to take a full part in their church in a proto-democratic manner. That is clear from the re-iterated phrases found in the CWA where the wardens say that what they have done has been done with 'the full assent' of the parishioners. This would have been a perfectly appropriate procedure, given that in every way their part of the church belonged to the parishioners. In other words, the medieval Zeitgeist was one of practically universal commitment in their churches by the parishioners. In return they expected to receive the benefits of salvation, social healing, and the daily round of spiritual prayers and praise offered up on their behalf by a caste of trained professionals: the clerks, singers and higher clergy in each of their churches.

What organs were used for has to be seen against this background ... what does that imply?



Adderbury and Alkerton (Oxon.), Broad Chalke (Wilts), Exeter & Gloucester cathedrals, Hillesden (Bucks), March (Ely)

Once organs started to be placed in the quires and sanctuaries of churches, they too became part of the apparatus of salvation and praise. But they also were part of the educational system too, young singers being expected to learn to play organs. They were taught by other musicians, some of whom were priests, employed on an annual or permanent basis as chaplains or chantry singers. Organs were so closely associated with singers, being played by them as well as playing in alternation with

them, that no doubt their sound resembled singers too. We do not know exactly how singers were trained vocally, but the fact that they could be singing for several hours a day suggests a very different vocal approach from the usual one today. (We shouldn't forget that most elements of singing techniques today date from only around 200 years ago.)



Singers: Fairford, Glos



Quire stall clerics: Stowlangtoft, Suffolk

Descriptions of the sound of singers are not common, but injunctions to singers to sing 'moderately and without exaggeration' seem eminently sensible in the circumstances, as do those suggesting they sing 'like doves'. Did the treble pipes of organs also sing like doves? Did the bass pipes of organs (or rather their tenors) sound like adolescent singers whose voices had recently broken? One thing is clear: organs would have been pitched at the pitch of the singers in any given place and not the other way round, as is the case now.

An essential tool for understanding at a practical every-day level what went on in churches – especially in their naves but also to a degree in their chancels as well – are the 400 or so surviving CWA up to 1600. Like the churches themselves, the survival and the contents of these precious documents are terribly uneven. There are hardly any surviving accounts from the northern counties, for example, and somewhat frustratingly, by contrast there are many that were rescued from churches destroyed in the Great Fire of London. But where it is still possible to examine the churches to which they refer, much can be learned about their day to day activities. Many accounts include references to work on organs – not usually their purchase, which would have been the task of those in charge of chancels, but

to their maintenance, a task that the wardens shouldered on behalf of their parishioners.

Thame, Oxon., church wardens' accounts for 1477 to 1480

... new organ lofts were built and accounted by church wardens:

It'm sol Thome Carpenter s pr factura ij solarior[um] p. organis
situanda in grosso viij s viij d
It' sol Petro marmyon p i magno ligno macremij p dicta solario iij s iv d
It' sol , lj lignis meremii ad dict' opus x d
It' sol p ij plankes ad id'm opus xij d
It'm in certa clavis viz iij peny nayle & vd nayle viij d
It'm in assertibus viz CC & i qrt' ad idem opus vj [s]
It' sol Will'mo Smyth p' henges hoks & ij barres ferri ad id'm ops xxij d ob
S'ma xxiiij [s] iij [d]

CWA include payments for tuning (which they write as 'mending', from the Latin *emendatione*, meaning being 'improved' or 'ameliorated'), and these tunings usually cost a few pence a time. Repairs made to bellows were also often called 'mending' but were made at a considerably higher cost and also involved the purchase of materials such as animal skins, pack thread and, nails and glue. If 'mending' involved more elaborate repairs to the soundboard, pipes or actions, then the accounts will show payments for a few days' work for the organ maker and his board (food and drink) and lodging - and possibly fodder for his horse.

CWA also include payments made to players, though until the Latin music and its customary practices ceased, these tend to be sporadic, as if either the wardens were topping up payments or – perhaps more likely – they were paying for those services that directly affected, and were desired, by the church people. Such services might have included the annual major celebration of donors to the church: the solemn reading of the bede-roll, which is itself based directly on the CWA. Payments might have been made for singers' and players' participation in masses celebrated by and for the various guilds at their various altars. But accounts also include payments on feast-days such as the Annunciation, a favourite feast in England, and since this almost always comes during Lent, we should probably not assume that organs in this country were never played during Advent or Lent.

There are also CWA payments for the playing of organs on the three major festivals of Christmas, Easter and Whitsun. In these cases, were they paying for 'extras' of some sort, over and above the use of the organ in that chancel at masses or offices? Or extra antiphons, since very often such payments are included among those made to additional, invited singers? Something special was certainly going on, because these payments are frequently accompanied by payment for fine fortified wine, such as Madiera, to be offered to singers and players. This is the equivalent if you like (and perhaps more fun than) Canterbury cathedral choir's annual rather decorous sherry party at the archbishop's palace.

These extras ‘paid’ to the singers reminds us that we are not dealing with a fully-monetised economy. It is quite clear from CWA that cash payments could not always have covered all expenses. Local artisans such as blacksmiths, it seems, did not charge more than the materials cost to their church, being recompensed in some other way for their time. One imagines that within the village economy that barter or other exchange of goods (food, clothes, even housing?) would have been the norm, though it is also clear that by the early C16 in towns it had become normal for cash collections to be taken for special projects. One such early C16 collection was going on in the city-centre church of St Andrew in Canterbury where a man called Thomas Taleis was collecting money for a new organ for his church. This organ was to be made in London, probably, but anyway had to be paid for in coin of the realm. If this collector was the same Thomas Tallis who we all know as the singer and composer who lived through almost the whole of the C16, his education and early professional life also need to be placed in the context of church music and organ playing as practised in England at the very start of that century.

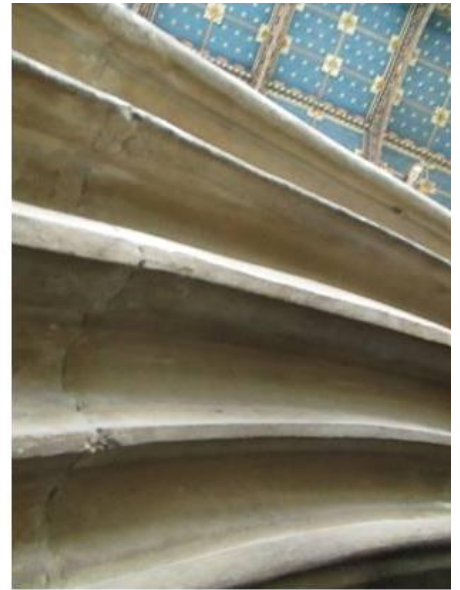
Organ makers needed to be paid in cash because, as now, a good deal of the cost of an organ went in the purchase of materials. Many materials were at hand and did not need to be imported; country-wide trading in tin, lead and copper was well-established, with trading in these metals and other products such as sheep, salt and pigs which were exported through eastern and south-eastern ports. These exports made it possible to import such vital materials as fine Baltic or Burgundian oak through the eponymous port of Waynescott and softwoods through the port of Deal, both in Kent. Within the market system in England, organ makers would have had access to wire drawn in Coventry (vital for pallet springs and other action parts), to iron for blacksmiths’ work. Trading in colour pigments as well as gold-leaf and silver foil was also well-established. So the organ makers we come across in the major towns such as London, Norwich and Bristol, and those based further towards the south-west in ‘tin country’, would have found that all the materials they would need were quite easily obtainable. Woodworking skills were clearly also not lacking – as you can see when you take the time to admire the fine craftsmanship and structural engineering of rood, chancel and other screens.

I am not going to discuss again in any detail the placing of organs in churches because I have covered that in previous lectures here and elsewhere and in today’s book. But I’d like to take just one example: the church at Southwold on the Suffolk coast, near to other ports at Covehithe and Walberswick where there are strong signs of organs galleries and their access in their ruined chancels.

At Southwold there is a large arch (what in medieval English would have been called a ‘vowt’ or vault) through which the choir organ of the 1880s Walker organ protrudes in its rather elaborate Victorian casework. This arch is of the same design as late-C15-medieval windows in the east end of the chancel, newly-built then to light the ceremonial in the sanctuary. The arch is 12 feet high and its lower ledge is about 8 feet off the ground; the player could get up to the organ placed on a



Southwold



gallery there from behind it - and most important there was also a room behind it large enough for the several bellows an organ in that large church would need.

Organs were, to sum up, icons of technological prowess and local pride, celebrated in 'The playing of the merry organ, sweet singing in the quire' ...

When did organs come into English parish churches?

Let's go back to our starting date of 1300. By this time, England was a rich trading nation, so far untouched by the great plagues that were to recur from later in the C14. Building technology had greatly advanced and in fact by the early part of the C14 most of the very large monasteries and cathedrals and the greater churches had already been built, including the tallest building in Europe, the central spire of Lincoln cathedral.



Lincoln cathedral, spire completed 1311 (model)

At an estimated 524 feet (159.7 metres), it was probably the tallest building in the world until it fell in 1549, and the second tallest church in the world of all time.

Ulm Minster's west towers, completed only in 1890, were to be taller at 530 feet (161.5 metres).



Chartham, Kent early C14

Small or narrow chancels had been replaced with larger ones with windows in them with their characteristic 'decorated' tracery and statutory colleges were being set up. Written-down music began to be more common, adding new repertoires to the normal daily musical diet which had been (and continued to be) plainsong with or without improvised descant and burdens. Questions over the celibacy or not of the

senior parish and cathedral clergy had been more or less settled and the career paths for professional musicians were becoming well-established.

By this time, the start of the C14, large double-cube chancels, with excellent acoustics, those that we have come to call 'singing chancels', also become much more common. These are designed with larger windows that let in more light; they are far less coloured than previous ones. They greatly aid the reading of music, now beginning to be written down and not only sung by memory. Such chancels are found not only where there are known, statutory, colleges of clerics but almost everywhere across the country.



Norbury, Derbys
(Original early C14
glass)



They are also large in order to accommodate the larger staff of personnel working in them. The earliest CWA that survive from the 1330s onwards already show that a lot was going on musically, and include a few places such as Bristol where parish church organs were already in place.

By the end of the C14, the Church was criticised for various of its practices which were thought by some to be excessive. These did not include music – though William Langland, in the voice of Piers the Plowman, appears to complain of the unsettled and therefore difficult life of a stipendiary chantry singer, a married one in his case. And some Lollards, who were presumably not musicians, also complained of too much emphasis on ceremony in the performance of the liturgy, in which

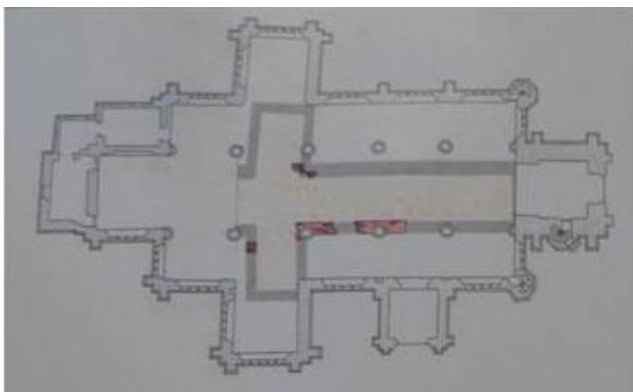
music was predominant. Chaucer, writing later in the C14, did not write a Singer's Tale, unfortunately. Although he poked fun at monks and the pardoner and his tricks, he wrote a very sympathetic character introduction to the 'poor town parson', saying

*He was a shepherde and noght a mercenarie.
And thogh he hooly were and vertuous,
He was to synful men nat despitous ...*

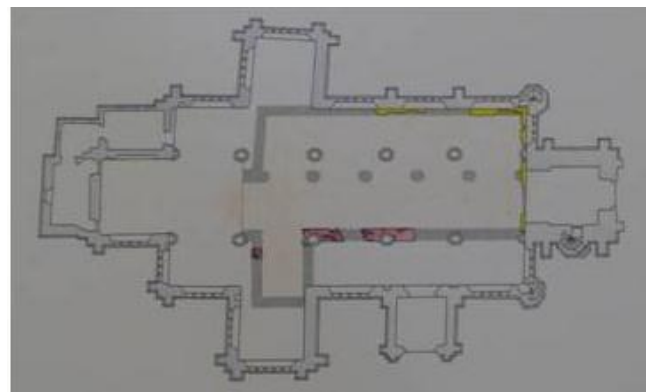
As a town priest, he would also be a capable singer – more capable than Langland, one suspects.

Dr Roger Bowers thinks that the Church's response to the attacks of the followers of Wycliffe (the Lollards) was to up its game considerably. It reinforced the training of clerks of all kinds, including those who became adult singers whether lay or ordained into the higher ranks of the priesthood.

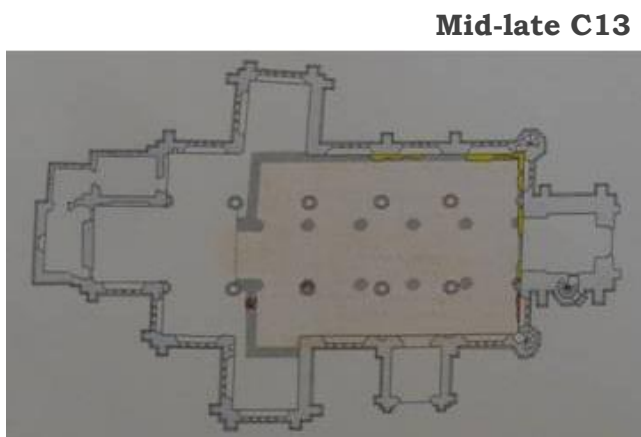
Enlargement of Ashburton church through the medieval period



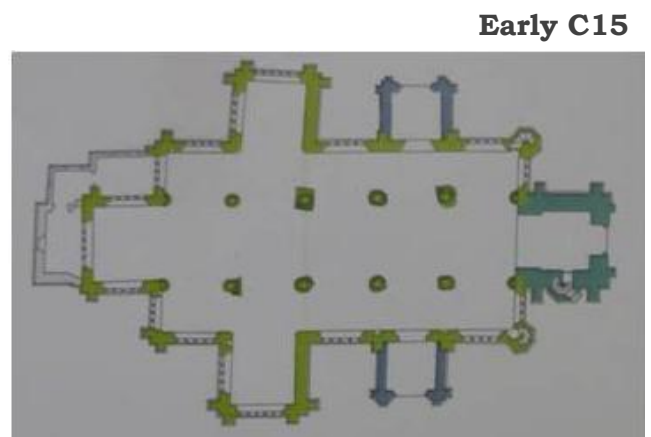
Late C12



Early-mid C13



Mid-late C13



Early C15

By the time of Chaucer's rather sudden disappearance in 1400, the various window tracery styles collectively known as Perpendicular were universal throughout Britain and the extension and rebuilding of churches were well under way. Roofs in the peoples' part of the building were removed, arcade walls were raised and new roofs installed onto walls which had been raised to include clear-storey windows. Aisles were extended, widened and reinforced to take the extra thrust of these roofs and to

give more space for the activities of the people in their churches, including additional altars.

In the chancels, the clerical part of the building, extra altars were also added, and the cult of Lady vespers and masses was eagerly fostered, in addition to the eight daily offices and high and chantry masses.

Bampton, Devon



Swanton Morley, Norfolk

Dorchester, Oxon



Stobbes for keeping books

Equipment for the larger staff, including books and volumes of music and copes for those working in the quire, the *choristas*, had to be stored somewhere. All the mass vestments and ornaments for the sanctuary needed to be kept safe too, so secure buildings were added to the NE side of chancels or incorporated in newly-designed chancels. These, as we have explained in previous talks here, were also often used as the places to put the bellows of the fixed organs in sanctuaries. These gallery or loft organs were being installed from the early part of the C15 in a much wider variety of churches than before, together with their moveable 'portatyff' counterparts. Organs also start to appear in inventories by around the middle of the C15, and from slightly later on their maintenance and tuning crop up in CWA.

In parish churches it seems that new arrangements along the lines of the pre-existing arrangements for the repair of vestments and books were extended to cover the repair and maintenance of organs, the parish people taking their share in this work. Necessary structural work was included, it seems: in 1512 at St Laurence in the major monastic town of Reading, the organ was moved from a loft, possibly part of the rood loft, to a new position. This operation apparently involved piercing a wall and 'turning a vowt' or making a brick arch 'for the belys of the organ' and

wainscott was purchased in London for a structure which seems to have been supported on posts. All this sounds like a typical organ gallery, held up by these posts, with some special accommodation of the bellows and their operators. We hoped to have a good look at this church and see if there were still any signs of all this. But when we tried to get into it one Sunday morning, it was locked. An evangelical sect had taken over and the place was all theirs ... and I suspect that any organ there is only a memory.



What did medieval organs contain?

Parts of organs which date from the 1380s are now preserved in the Swedish National Historical Museum. They were made for churches in Norrlanda and Gotland and might indicate the sort of fixed organs that came into churches during the C14. They have keyboards for fingers and feet, but no stop-sliders. The fact that they have pedalboards, once with their own pipes, suggests to me that these were used to play possibly slow-moving plainsong lines, around which the organ player would improvise descant and burdens, using vocal techniques he would have learned as a boy and adolescent.

Norrlanda organ, Stockholm Museum



There is every likelihood that English organs also were equipped with pedalboards. One can hardly imagine that, given the trading links between England and Scandinavia, organs in a country with as sophisticated and internationally-respected music as England would have had organs less well-equipped than those on small Swedish islands. I think we need to bury once and for all the myth that all English medieval organs were small and pedal-less. They may have been like this after the Reformation, when money was tight and organs expensive, but historians need to beware of copying what others have written or – perhaps more seriously – assuming that what happened later reflected what had happened before. It is always possible that things got worse, not better, and the Reformation century was definitely a period of savage decline in the practice, education, training and standards in musical performance in churches.

It is of course interesting that the written word ‘stop’ in relation to organs does not appear in CWA until early in the C16, but to assume that ‘stops’ had not made an appearance before then might be wrong, on two counts:

In the first place, we do not actually know what the English word ‘stop’ meant at this date, nor – if it was a technical term used by organ makers – how long it took to travel, first from the mouths of organ makers into the ears of church wardens, and then from the mouths of wardens into the ears of the scribes who wrote out the annual – or sometimes biennial – church accounts. Nor do we know when sliders were first used in organs; all we can say is that the word ‘slider’ with the meaning we give it now was first used two centuries after we know from the mid-C16 Suffolk organs that such things were in organs in England. The word ‘stop’ might even have been the actual name for these sliders, stopping off as they do a number of holes at the same time, as in stopping the holes in a woodwind instrument with several fingers. When the word ‘stop’ appears in C16 CWA when a ‘stop’ has to be

repaired, it is usually mentioned along with payment to a blacksmith, so the word might have already might have drifted from the specific (the slider) to something associated with a slider, such as the action needed to move it. But there is no need for what we now call a stop action in a small organ because you can pull and push the sliders directly from one end or the other of a soundboard. So perhaps the CWA use of the word 'stop', whatever it means, has to be associated with the larger fixed loft or gallery organs with a soundboard placed out of reach of the player?

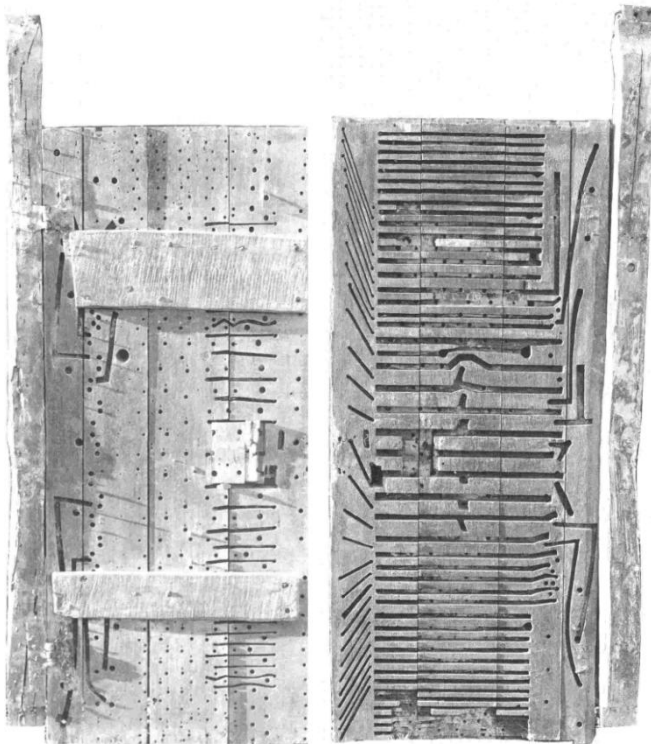
Second, it is quite possible that the larger organs of the C14 had two or even more keyboards, each controlling a group of pipes. These pipe groups might have ranged from just the two unison Principals, the pipes that imitated the sounds of the singers when played in alternation with them, to a large bright mixture to be used at festive moments during a mass or office. Or anything in between – and at any, possibly unrelated, pitch. Such organs would not necessarily have needed sliders; even a large and very expensive early C16 organ like that at All Hallows by the Tower had only a few stops, according to the contract. It may have had more than one keyboard, with each keyboard controlling a pipe-group, or the word 'stop' might still have meant what it could have meant in a slider-less organ: a wind-valve which cut off the wind from one or more subsidiary soundboards otherwise all playable from the same set of keys.



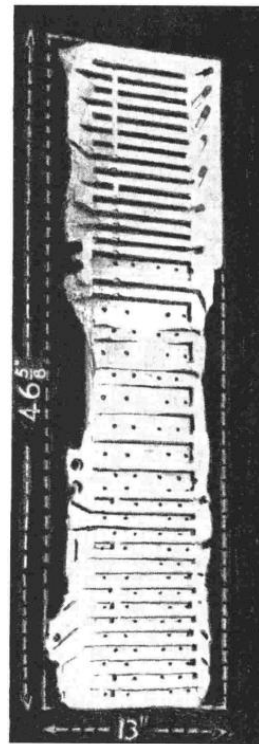
1480 case Koorkirk, from Utrecht

Or the organ at All Hallows – made at a time when it seems that sliders were known in other organs in NW Europe – was worked by a combination of the two, some sliders and some wind-valves, both operated from near the keys and perhaps called 'stops'.

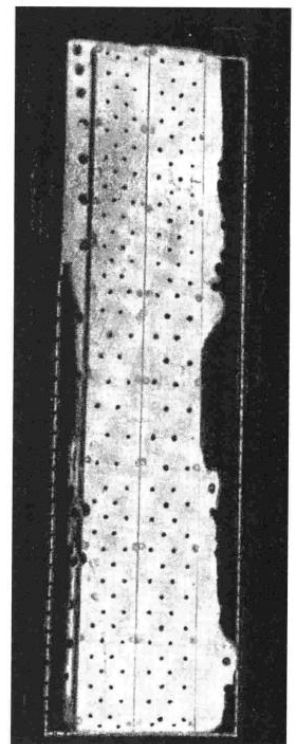
The two Marian organs that Dominic Gwynn and others found in Suffolk and then reconstructed are 'portatyff' organs and have sliders.



Wetheringsett



Wingfield



From *Two pre-Reformation organ soundboards* by Timothy Easton and Stephen Bicknell



Photos from www.goetzegwynn.co.uk

I wonder if – as seems to be the case with back-positive or ‘chair’ organs elsewhere in NW Europe – sliders may have been first used on the relatively smaller soundboards of such ‘portatyff’ or ‘chair’ organs about a hundred years before the date of these important C16 English relics ; which had perhaps been made by Mr Betts at Wetherden or one of the Arnold family in Norwich.

Polyphony

Old Hall MS



Eton Choirbook

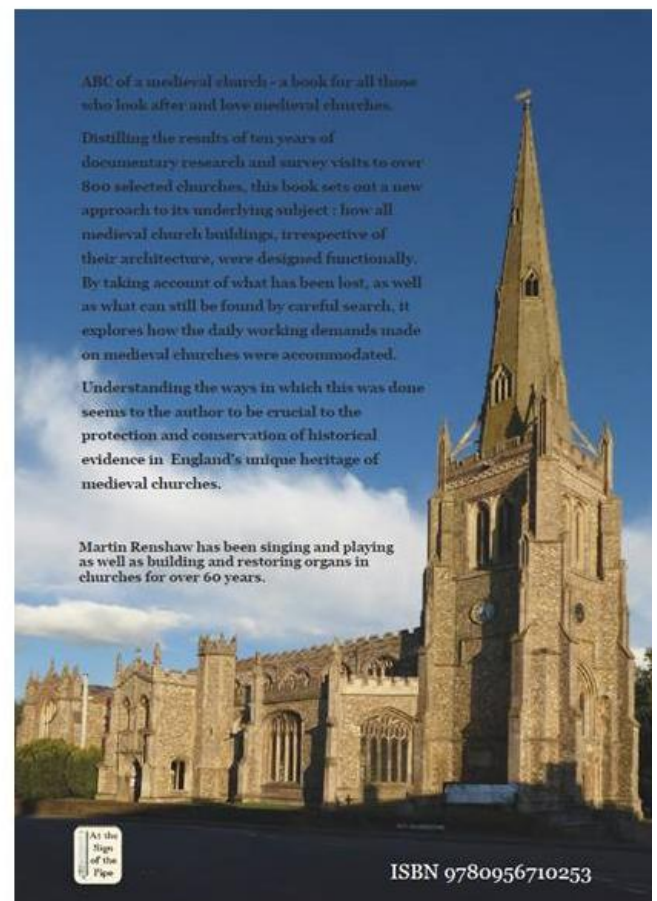
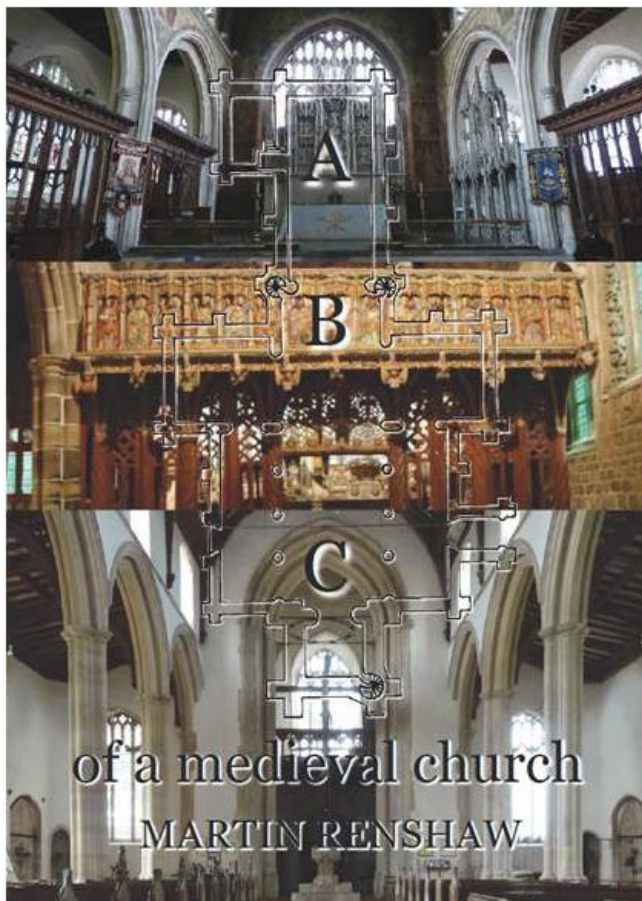


By the end of the C15, we have incontrovertible evidence for the outcome of two centuries of intensive musical training and practice, in the form of the collection of music gathered from all over Britain that constitutes the Eton Choir book. This was compiled around 1490 for use in the recently-completed second and larger chapel in that royal statutory chantry college. If only a single organ book had survived the 1548 burnings, we might know if organs were used with the singers using this and other similar compilations, but we don't have any, so we have to make intelligent guesses as best we can. But since this music was (and is) among the most elaborate and challenging choral music in Europe, it is inconceivable that organs lagged behind. Their players had after all been brought up as singers, even if by now there is evidence that there were dedicated organ players on the staffs of major establishments.

I haven't time to go into any further detail today, but I hope you get my drift: that we can discover a great deal from careful investigation into buildings and documents, plus what we can glean from surviving music and from what we can fairly postulate from our own knowledge of designing and making organs. All this helps to build up a fairly complete picture, a context, for filling in the gaps.

This does not apply only to Britain but also to the whole of NW Europe, where exactly the same conditions applied before the various reformations and counter-reformations altered everything almost everywhere from the 1520s onwards. But we have a real advantage here, because uniquely in Britain, and especially in England and Wales, once the whole corpus of Latin musical liturgy had been destroyed in 1548, chancels in England and Wales were essentially abandoned. Therefore, a lot of the vital clues as to how churches were designed to be used have survived. It has only been a matter of adding music back into the history of these buildings and their archaeology to begin to understand more fully the physical, designed architectural, context for the choral and organ music that was practised in them.

These musical and documentary contexts, and the buildings we have examined, suggest to us that organs were to be found in probably half of all the 12,000 or so churches then in England and Wales. And that is the answer to Peter's question, as far as we can give one at present.



You will find that the little ABC book gives you more of the context you will need for understanding what went on in those far-off middle ages. I hope too that it will give you useful hints on finding what went on in those gap years in the churches you visit in the future.