

ICBM 2016 Paper

The grand narrative of cathedral history is well known: medieval monastic foundations (Canterbury's Benedictine community founded by Augustine on the ruins of a Roman church in 597) dissolved in the 1540s in what must be one of the biggest property confiscations in history – including, in Canterbury's case, not just land but the gold- and jewel-encrusted tomb of St Thomas a Becket, to whom the place owed much of its pilgrim-generated wealth and, with a bit of help from Geoffrey Chaucer, much of its fame.

Then re-constituted as independent entities with their own system of governance, Cathedrals were run by a Dean, heading a 'Chapter' of 12 Prebends, and the musical staff of the new foundation was established at the same time. The intention was that the choir should be made up of Minor Canons – ordained men who could sing. Most places found that impractical, and Canterbury recognised from the start that it would need a core of proper singers, AND a bunch of deputies – “Substitutes” – to be sure of a decent ensemble for the daily offices – two of them, morning Matins and Evensong, every day of the year. So we got 12 Lay Clerks (gentlemen singers, from whom an organist was selected – Canterbury did not have a separate Organist until 1845), 6 'Substitutes', 10 boy choristers and, for a while at least, 4 instrumentalists.

The grand narrative continues with the English Civil Wars, at the end of which the victorious Puritans closed the cathedrals. Canterbury was put in the hands of a small body of men established during the Reformation here: the Six Preachers. From preaching occasionally in return for £37 a year and a supply of wood for their fires, they were suddenly put in charge. By this time the building looked like this **[opening slide; Johnson engraving]** – here is a drawing of the South Prospect in 1655, done by a local artist, Thomas Johnson – remember that name; you're going to see three examples of his work, and the next one is shocking. That's a warning for those of a sensitive disposition. This is a paper concerned with people about whom you are very unlikely to hear anywhere else, so although Canterbury's sufferings at the hands of the Puritans

are slightly off-piste, I can't resist mentioning one lively personality here: one Richard Culmer, known as "Blue Dick" because he insisted on wearing a blue cassock, was a Puritan preacher whose time had come. In a "Letter from Canterbury Cathedral" of 1644 he tells with malevolent glee of the shattering of some of the cathedral's medieval stained glass. This sort of hooliganism was preserved for posterity in a remarkable painting executed by Johnson, in 1657. Brace yourselves: "Puritans in Canterbury Cathedral" [\[click to show image\]](#) shows an upsetting view of the Cathedral Quire. Devoid of altar, Augustine's Chair, or any other adornment, the most eye-catching feature is the man clambering over the wooden monastic stalls to smash up some stonework. Closer inspection shows other tiny figures, up in the triforia, having a go at some of the stained glass. It's strikingly similar to Culmer's description:

A Minister (that's Culmer) being then on the top of the ladder, neer 60 steps high, with a whole pike in his hand, ratling down proud Becket's glassy bones ... To him it was said, 'tis a shame for a Minister to be seene there; the Minister replied, "Sir, I count it no shame, but an honour, My [Master] whipt the living buyers & sellers out of the Temple; these are dead Idolls, which defile the worship of God here, being the fruits and occasions of Idolatry." Some wisht he might breake his neck, others said it should cost bloud. But he finished the worke, and came downe well, and was in very good health when this was written.

It wasn't all doom and gloom: Puritanism did not seem to preclude antiquarian activity, and Johnson was put to work creating a beautiful ichnograph of the Cathedral for a book in 1655 [\[click to show image\]](#). So perhaps it's not so surprising that when this sorry chapter in England's history was ended with the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660, the cathedral was quick to open for business-as-usual again. Cathedral governance was resumed and the musical foundation re-formed (seven of the Canterbury men who returned to the choir stalls had been singing there before the Commonwealth, and one had been a chorister).

The Cathedral History Grand Narrative, for the purposes of this paper, doesn't have much to tell between the Restoration and the nineteenth century; cathedrals were left unmolested until the political reforms of the Ecclesiastical Commissioners combined with theological and social

turmoil to create a perfect storm for an institution which I am arguing was, essentially, still medieval. For now, then, so much for the Grand Narrative. Only occasionally, in its footnotes, do we get a glimpse of the musicians. They are to be found in the accounts, in the decisions of the Dean and Chapter, and occasionally in diaries of visitors and observers. The rest of this paper is to be spent squinting at these footnotes.

Gentlemen singers in the choir of Canterbury Cathedral are called 'Lay Clerks'. The name bears explanation: a priest is a 'Clerk in Holy Orders'. Remember the intention to have Minor Canons as the singers? Interestingly, the aforementioned Richard Culmer levels this charge against the corrupt cathedral in his *Letter from Canterbury*: that

“The Cathedrall Prelates to maintain their Quire Consort, doe get their Singing-men into the Ministry, and provide them Benefices in diverse Parishes, they being many of them only reading-Priests – as Mr. &c. (the name is withheld) late Weaver, now Reading-Priest, Parson of St. Mary Bredman and Peticanon of that Cathedral; Mr. &c.: late Tobacco-pipe-maker, and reprieved from the gallows, now reading-Priest and Parson of St. Martins.”

...and so on, and so on. I haven't been able to verify the accusation that one of the former minor canons was a convicted felon due to be hanged; I just like the idea that his singing saved his life.

It's time to look at the sources.

We have the Treasurers Books from 1660 onwards [\[click\]](#), and we have the “Dean's Books” [\[click\]](#) from 1695. The main concern of the latter is to record the proceedings of Chapter: the half-yearly meetings (Midsummer, starting 25th June, and St. Catherine's, 25th November) [\[see succession of slides showing several days' deliberations\]](#)) at which decisions were made relating to financial matters, to the appointment of members of the cathedral foundation, to the general upkeep of the cathedral fabric and precincts, to any Archbishop's Visitations (every few years) and to any matters which brought the cathedral and its staff into contact with the world beyond the Precincts.

It's difficult to remember, much of the time, that we are reading the proceedings of the management of a place of worship. We have to look hard for any references to the daily worship, and mention of music and musicians is even more scarce. Most things take precedence – notably, in 1741, earnest discussion about the distribution of space in the cellars for the canons' wine storage. With careful procedures laid down for the departure of the more senior canons, agreement is finally reached, as shown here [\[click\]](#):

“when any of the said Cellars shall be void by the death or Cession of any of the said prebendaries, such Cellar shall be at the option of the other Prebendaries according to seniority.”

When lay clerks do, finally, make an appearance, it is pretty peremptory. They are usually simply recorded as having been appointed into the “room” (which only means “place” in this context; there was no accommodation on offer here) of a predecessor. For the first couple of centuries of the Dean's Books, this happens when someone dies. There was no retirement age; lay clerks, like the clerics, had a job for life, whatever their singing wash like – well beyond the point at which they were “useless in the choir”, as the Dean's Books bluntly put it. As time goes on, the Dean and Chapter seem to take more notice of the fact that someone approaching death may not be singing so well as they did in their youth, but attempts to impose retirement only eventually bore fruit in the later 19th century as part of a pay package which the lay clerks reluctantly accepted. Meanwhile, the system of Substitutes clearly played its part.

Let's talk money: it's old money [\[click\]](#) , pounds, shillings and pence, so a quick primer [\[click\]](#): 12 pence in a shilling, [\[click\]](#) 20 shillings in a pound. [\[click\]](#) A guinea is £1.1s, [\[click\]](#) a crown is 5s., so half a crown [\[click\]](#) is 2s.6d. You'll be tested on all this. These were proper coins, by the way: if anyone wants to see the crown I was given for my christening, I have it here.

A Canterbury Lay Clerk in 1664 earned [\[click\]](#) £4.10s a quarter – £18 pounds a year – whilst a “lousy Prebend” (Lawrence Sterne’s phrase!¹) pocketed about [\[click\]](#) £40, plus dividends on the leases given out every quarter. The Dean took home a whopping [\[click\]](#) £300 as his basic salary. And if you want some idea of what any of this is worth in today’s money, measuringworth.com puts a Lay Clerk on about £2,500 a year as against the Dean’s £41,500. The Minor Canons got [\[click\]](#) £3.6s.8d., the Substitutes [\[click\]](#) £16.2s., and the Choristers [\[click\]](#) £5 a year. Whoever was in charge of the Choristers (and we may assume, I think, that this meant teaching them the 3 R’s) got [\[click\]](#) £14. This was usually the Organist: a Lay Clerk who could play, and who was given an additional [\[click\]](#) £27 a year for his efforts. Lay Clerks seem to have earned a bit of extra money doing odd jobs: music copying was paid a rate of [\[click\]](#) 8d. per sheet. The organ-blower got [\[click\]](#) 10s a quarter – £2 a year – and made a little extra money on the side: if ever he caught a rat in the organ loft, he was given [\[click\]](#) 6d. He does this with suspicious regularity. I think he was breeding them. Still, it was cheaper to keep him at it than to repair the bellows when the rats had gnawed through the leather, as happened in 1674, at a cost of [\[click\]](#) £2.1s.8d. It was a Lay Clerk, John Pease, who fixed them.

Whatever they got, it was better than the alternative. We glimpse that in the “Eleemosynary” monies – charitable donations handed out to those who came to the Eleemosynary gate. Here [\[click\]](#) is a map of the cathedral Precincts; here’s the gate, tucked away in the top right-hand corner. I think this [\[click\]](#) is what it looks like today – bricked up to provide an office for the King’s School. For social historians, these pages [\[click\]](#) are evidence of the pre-welfare-state ‘moral economy’; for ordinary people, they are a catalogue of human suffering:

[\[click\]](#) To a hansom youth about 15; had his tongue cut out, as by his signes I understood he had been a slave in Turkey: 1s

[\[click\]](#) To 3 lame souldiers that had but 3 legs between them: 3s.

[\[click\]](#) To a passenger that had the leprosy: 6d.

[\[click\]](#) To a distressed gentleman that spake good Latin, well cladd but had with him 2 sick children: 3s.

¹ A Sentimental Journey...

[click] Given to one Brown who lost his arm by a cart falling upon it: 1s.6d.

What you now have on the slide is the kind of grim roll-call of worth we normally see nowadays in insurance documents: everything valued, occupations and sufferings alike. For our purposes, it's a glimpse of the world beyond the cathedral walls. For those not ordained, if you could stay inside, your life chances were somewhat improved.

The Lay Clerks would have needed other employment. Occasionally, the Dean and Chapter offer it, as we've seen. The only other clues to musicians' other work might be found in the mention occasionally made of choristers' destinations. Again, these are only mentioned when they affect the D&C directly: early on in the Deans Books, in 1698, the mother of one Thomas Pierce is reported to have asked whether her son might be apprenticed to a barber whilst still in the choir. The D&C response is a dismissive "if his service to this master was not inconsistent to his service to the church we should not take any notice of it. But if it was a hindrance to his learning or other attendance she was to expect he should be dismissed, to which she consented." We don't know how the barbering worked out, but the singing served him well: Pierce re-appears in the choir as a Substitute, then a Lay Clerk, a few years later, adding 55 years' service to his time as a chorister. On other occasions, the D&C gives a donation "upon his being bound apprentice" to a shoemaker, bookbinder, or other such artisan craft. Low-level occupation and income.

It's not surprising, then, that occasionally the choristers were tempted to crime. In 1756, half of them - 5 out of the 10 boys - were hauled before the Dean and Chapter after being caught: "guilty of stealing lead from the church, and other high crimes which they confessed to be true: and whereas the said boys were this day summoned before the Dean and Chapter and confessed they had been guilty of the offences charged against them, we decree they all shall be forthwith expelled from the several offices in this church, & receive no profits from hence from 27 July last." It took a few months to replace them. No further details of the crime or its detection are given in the Dean's Books, which means we can only speculate as to whether any of the lay clerks put them up to it. It's even more tantalising to note that this wasn't the first time: in 1711 the

Treasurers Books record a donation of 5 shillings to one Samuel Elvin “for discovering the boy that stole the lead”. [\[click\]](#)

Whatever job a man had alongside his lay-clerkship, it had to allow him to sing a morning and evening service – Matins and Evensong – every day of the year. The only example of which we can be completely certain is that of Thomas Goodban, senior, and we only know this because of another source entirely. He is mentioned in John Marsh’s diaries as being the innkeeper of the Prince of Wales – the pub in which the Canterbury Catch Club met. He was also a lay clerk in the cathedral choir – had been since 1770, having joined as a chorister in 1761. The result of all this moonlighting was a high rate of absence, as recorded in the Precentor’s Books [\[click\]](#) from 1743 onwards – the kind of behaviour which had the lot of them summoned before the Dean and Chapter and [\[click\]](#) “admonished for neglect of duty” in 1770. This must have seemed a bit rich, considering that most of the Prebends had several jobs which meant that their attendance was little better, but the Lay Clerks were in no position to argue, as the tone of this sentence makes clear.

Our perception of these men has unfortunately tended to conform to that of John Earle in *Microcosmographie* in 1626. You know how it starts:

The common singing men in cathedral churches are a bad society and yet a company of good fellows, that roar deep in the Quire, deeper in the Tavern...

...and it goes on at some length about how drunk they usually are. Christopher Marsh, in *Music and Society in Early Modern England*, notes that our ears are drawn to discord, and Philip Barrett’s *Barchester* is littered with fights, intoxications and abuse. Canterbury seems to have seen a few spats, including one spectacular episode involving the awful Charles Blogg, but he should be regarded as the exception. He is quite a dramatic exception, so I’m going to tell you about him: his behaviour was so appalling as to merit dismissal, but only after a full hearing during which a number of witnesses were called to testify to his “lewd behaviour” [\[click\]](#).

Charles Blogg living with Mary Morris as his wife and having a child by her, and being addicted to cursing, swearing, and obscene talking, was presented and complained of to the Archdeacon's Court, 1718.

The facts were proved and as follows:

That he has shuffled and given different places of his marriage. This proved by 5 witnesses.

That he is very much addicted to cursing, swearing and filthy talking. Proved by 8 witnesses.

That he has had a child by the said Mary. Proved by 3 witnesses.

That he has boasted of his lewdness. Proved by 7 witnesses.

That he owned he had thrice lain with a whore in Christ Church Canterbury. Proved by Mr Thomas Beverton.

His piteous plea for clemency fell on deaf ears – the Chapter had clearly, and understandably, had enough of him. It's worth noting, though, that his brother William continued to sing for years after they'd kicked Charles out, and William's son, also Charles, was a chorister later on.

Such family connections are visible: surnames recur more frequently than can be accounted for by mere coincidence, and the suspicion that sons followed fathers into the choir is borne out by the very occasional identification of the family connection [[click to show William Pysing & son, 1684](#)]: this is Will Pysing, junior, collecting the salary for his father, who had been singing for decades but by then was too old to do anything. For poor families, the cathedral offered an education – albeit a fairly basic one – which would have been beyond their means otherwise. The Dean's Books pay scant attention to this aspect of their choristers' lives: we've mentioned the Master, and in 1742, the Organist is ordered to ensure the boys are schooled in their Catechism, but there is no discussion of a curriculum to be found in the DBs. At one point the D&C make provision for some sort of space to be created for their rehearsals, but the reference is unclear and leaves the impression of a makeshift affair: “Mr Treasurer is desired to separate the round room by the library from the passage to the church, by a partition about 7 or 8 foot high, and to provide a chair and table for Mr Raylton, that he may teach the choristers to sing there.” The first piece of hard evidence comes from the remarkable Maria Hackett in 1821. Known as “The chorister's friend”, Maria Hackett began a campaign to improve the lot of cathedral and

collegiate chapel choristers in the early 19th century and continued it for decades. In 1821 she published a book which detailed the conditions under which they were kept, schooled, and made to sing. Canterbury does not come out of this comparative analysis very well: whilst other cathedrals offered their choristers an education at their schools, Canterbury, as has been noted, didn't; Hackett's summary mentions only reading, writing and arithmetic forming their education. I'm no graphologist, but by the looks of their handwriting, as they sign for their quarterly stipends, it was limited.

Notwithstanding all the details we can find about choristers' and lay clerks' comings and goings in the DBs, the picture of the cathedral musicians in the eighteenth century is frustratingly faintly sketched. At one level, this plays to the conventional narrative with respect to this period: musicians were held in low esteem, and were (mostly) poorly paid. There is no reference to any formal training, and only very brief and infrequent mention of rehearsals. Cathedral singing seems to have been something one picked up as one went along. Some musicians are given occasional handouts for "teaching" the boys or, occasionally, men who are then appointed Substitutes, but that's all we know. [[click to show Wotton teaching Knot & Brown](#)].

Conclusion:

Reading the Dean's Books is an odd experience. The impression created is of a closed community, run by something strikingly like a hive mind. The decisions in the books are recorded as if taken by a convocation reaching a collective decision, which hands them down with lofty disdain to their inferiors.

That said, we might perceive a certain respect accorded the musicians' craft in the Books. Although it seems clear – judging by the occasional clues about other occupations we glean – that they are drawn from the middle and lower orders of a profoundly hierarchical society [[click to show Cruikshank's Beehive](#)], the best Lay Clerks are valued – most notably by additional remuneration for a while when a place becomes vacant so that a salary is going spare, for

example. Marsh notes that musicians occupy a contradictory anthropological position:

“musicians combine inferior social status with high cultural importance: a disjunction that generates certain peculiarities in the way they are treated ... there are at least indications that the musician sometimes enjoyed a special kind of status that was not adequately represented by the pennies in his pocket.”

I hope this paper has done something to celebrate that status. Thanks for listening.