

**The Rise and Fall of the
West Gallery: popular
religious music in the
eighteenth and nineteenth
centuries – essay overview**

Vic Gammon

**The Halifax Church Choir
Practicing at the Ring o'
Bells by Thomas Farrer,
c. 1800**





'The Old Way of Singing'

West Gallery Music: Schematic Chronology					
	Parish Church Music	Events	Publications	Use of Instruments	
1520		1530s-40s Henrician/Edwardian Reformation			1520
1540	Metrical psalms, sung unaccompanied before and after sermon. Lining out may have been practiced ad hoc. Use of 'common tunes'. Scanty evidence	1553 Marian Restoration; 1558 Elizabethan Settlement	1549 Sternhold & Hopkins Psalter/ Book of Common Prayer	Organs viewed as Popish; few parish churches had organs. Problem of funding.	1540
1560		Anglican protestantism state religion			1560
1580					1580
1600				Organs viewed with suspicion and neglected	1600
1620					1620
1640	1645 First official sanction for lining out: 'old way of singing'	1640-60 Civil War and Commonwealth		Iconoclasm of some organs by Parliamentary army	1640
1660					1660
1680		1688 Glorious Revolution	1696 Tate & Brady Psalter	Singing societies form in some places; limited organ building, mainly towns	1680
1700					1700
1720	Itinerant singing teachers; Emergence and use of futing tunes;		Popular church music published by Tans'ur, Arnold, Knapp, other itinerant teachers etc.	Introduction of bassoons and oboes into some churches, some support for instruments in churchwarden's accounts	1720
1740	portable instruments start to appear in church				1740
1760	Choir-bands emerge and flourish. Use of charity children		Continuing publication of music for 'country choirs'		1760
1780	Choir-bands - much local variation; unaccompanied 'old way of singing' continues in some places.			Choir-bands with mixed instruments relatively common. Some introduction of barrel organs, harmoniums and a few organs	1780
1800	Criticism of choir-bands				1800
1820	1830s Oxford Movement, enhanced criticism/decline				1820
1840	Decline of Choir-bands.				1840
1860	Further decline of choir bands; rise of new choir movements		1861 Hymns Ancient & Modern; 1872 <i>Under the Greenwood Tree</i>	Organs become more common 1860> many parish churches get organs, some get harmoniums.	1860
1880	New choirs and associations set new norms				1880
1900	Rare survivals and revivals of choir-bands and the 'old way of singing'				1900

Don't worry if you cannot read everything! A pdf version of these slides will be sent if you email me at vic.gammon@icloud.com

Michael Turner of Warnham, Sussex, 1796-1885,
Shoemaker, Parish Clerk, Sextant, Choir Leader,
Fiddler, Bell Ringer and Singer – led bell ringers
for Henry Burstow's wedding in 1855

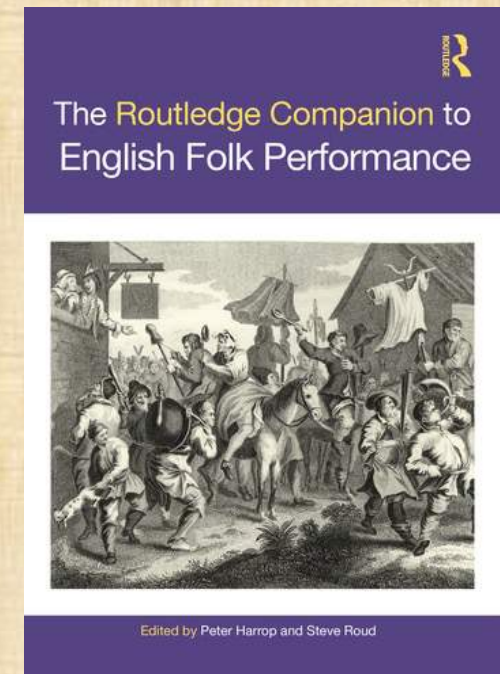
Origins of interest

- 1970s, Sussex University
- Anne Loughran's discovery of the **MacDermott Collection**
- Master's thesis 1977, 'Parochial Music in Sussex'
- *A Sussex Tune Book*, 1983
- DPhil, 1986 'Popular Music in Rural Society: Sussex 1815-1914'
 - Wanted to study music as social activity
 - Wanted not to be controlled by notions of genre, e.g. 'folk music', 'church music' etc.
 - Wanted to see how musicians (including singers!) made use of different musical idioms
 - Early article on Michael Turner of Warnham, (1976)
 - Music as area of dissent and conflict
- Various articles over the years



Routledge essay

- Allowed me to look again at subject first tackled in 1970s, 40+ years on
- Access to **many newly available resources**, e.g. newspapers, digitised archives
- Access to **recent research**, often for higher degrees
- 20k word essay – longest in book – kindness of editors



Essay - 6 Sections

- What is West Gallery Music?
- Who were the west gallery musicians?
- West Gallery Repertory, Instrumentation and Performance Style
- Opposition to and the Elimination of the Popular Church Music
- West Gallery Literature and Scholarship
- Survival and Revival

I will give a **brief overview** of each section to introduce the themes and point out what is new in the essay



‘South Down’ by James Nye, of Lewes, Quarry and Agricultural Worker, Gardiner, Fiddler and Fiddle Maker and Calvinist.

What is West Gallery Music?

- **Modern term**, contemporaries used 'parochial psalmody' and wrote of 'country choirs' and 'music in country churches'
- West **galleries constructed late C17th to early C19th** – idea improve church music
 - Not all churches had galleries or choir-bands
 - '...there are many of the clergy who do not think the cultivation of psalmody is a matter of much importance' (Edward Miller 1791).
- General **church decline after Restoration** – challenges of pluralism, building maintenance, non-conformity, opposition to tithes, 'folk Christianity'
- "The movement grew, flourished and had virtually died away within a century" (Weston)
- 1760-1840, west gallery music **emergent, dominant then residual in one lifetime**. (William Blake, 1757-1827, S T Coleridge, 1772 – 1834, Jane Austin, 1775 - 1817)



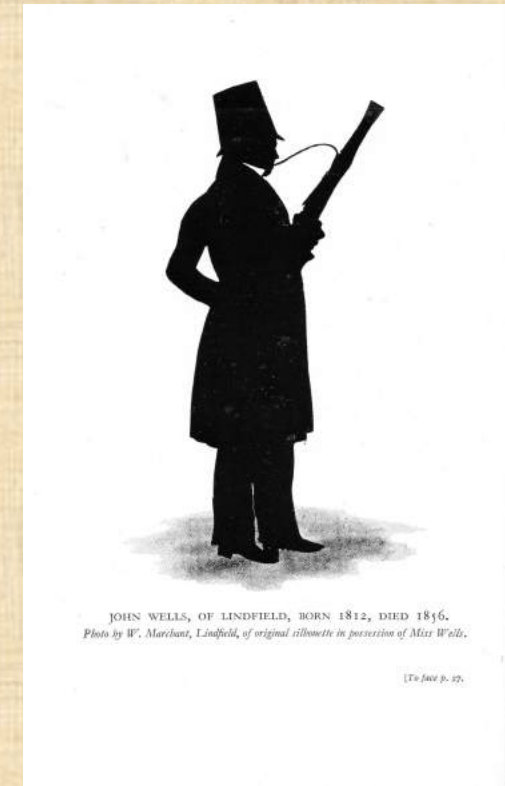
George Clarke "The Lamport Choir" (Northants) c.1825

Who were the west gallery musicians?

- Broad social profile centring on **artisan craftsmen** – not ‘average’
- Nineteenth century Sussex, 75 church musicians

Agricultural workers	17	23%
Tradesmen/artisans	49	65%
Farmers	7	9%
Professionals	3	4%

- Strength among shoemakers, blacksmiths, wheelwrights, carpenters and bricklayers etc. **Minority in most villages.**
- **Varied in different places;** e.g. weavers in Lancashire, knitters in East Midlands. Some places band consisted of village elite. [Excellent work of Katie Holland's 2010 thesis]



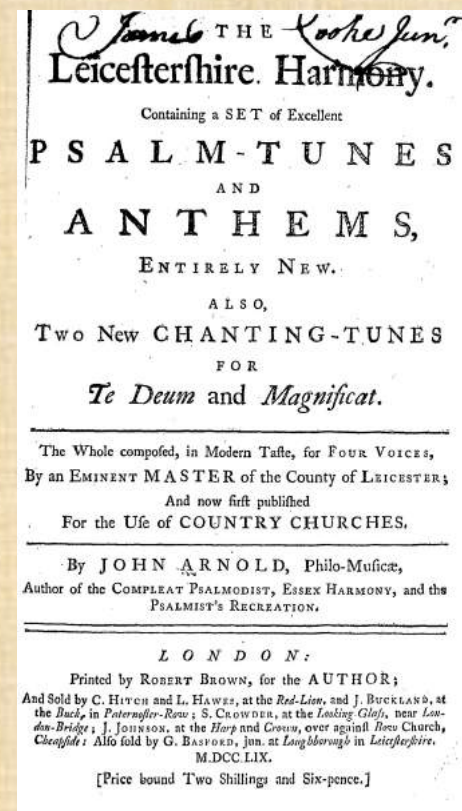
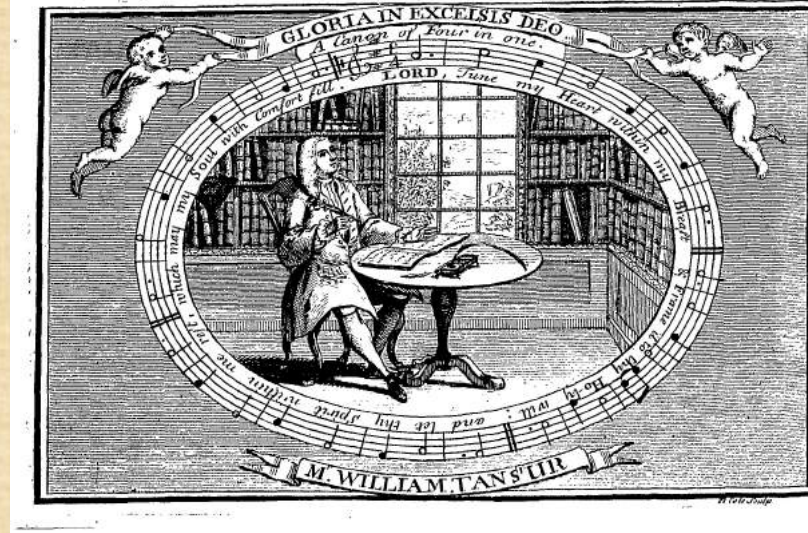
John Wells, Lindfield
Sussex, 1822-1856

West Gallery Repertory, Instrumentation and Performance Style:

1. Repertory

- Metrical psalms.
 - **Old Version** (1562, 'Sternhold and Hopkins')
 - **New Version** (1696, 'Tate and Brady')
 - Regularly sung in church – high degree of **popular familiarity**
 - Hymns not used much in Anglicanism until after c.1820 – origins in nonconformity, Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley, C18th
- Heterogenous repertory, drawn from many sources within church music
 - Old style **Reformation tunes** (homophonic) e.g. 'Old Hundredth'
 - **New psalm music composed for 'country choirs'**. Emergence of 'fuguing tunes' in C18th – increasing difficulty for congregational participation.
 - **Anthems** – performance pieces for choirs – excluded congregation
 - Increasing use of compositions of **peripatetic singing masters** – often criticised for unsuitability of their music e.g. Tans'ur, Arnold etc
 - Some **local composition** by musicians
 - Critics complained of the use of **unsuitable tunes** (e.g. 'Sweet Jenny Jones')

William Tans'ur frontspiece to *A compleat melody; or, the harmony of Sion* (1738)
John Arnold, *The Leicestershire Harmony* (1759)



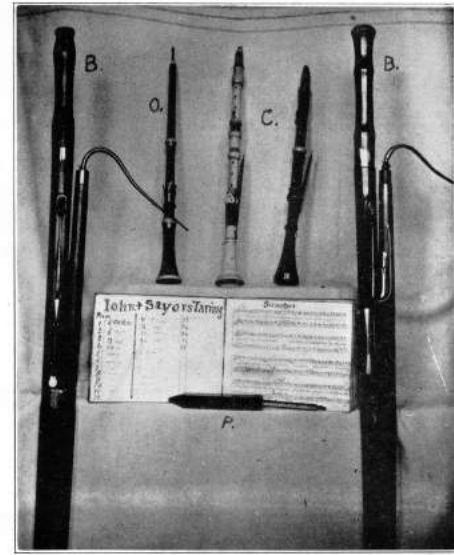
West Gallery Repertory, Instrumentation and Performance Style: 2.

Instrumentation



Illustration from "Old Country Life"
by Sabine Baring-Gould, pub.1890.

- Majority of churches had **no organs until later C19th**
- Some singing societies from later C17th
- Widely thought addition of **bass instrument** would improve singing. Bassoon then cello dominated. Some church purchases.
- Treble instruments added second part C18th: oboe, flute, clarinet.
- Weston detected:
 - double reed period c.1770-1810
 - string dominated period c. 1810-1840
- Choir-bands, 2-6 instruments, rarely up to c. 12 +. **Varied instrumentation** – what was available, odd combinations
- Commercial suppliers** 'Country Choirs, and Military and other Bands, supplied with complete sets of instruments, in tune with each other, on the most reasonable terms'.



INSTRUMENTS FORMERLY USED IN WEST TARRING CHURCH
B. Bassoon. O. Oboe. C. Clarinet. P. Pitchpipe.



James Nye's self-made fiddle



West Gallery Repertory, Instrumentation and Performance Style:

3. Performance style

'Hark, Hark'
communicated by
Sam Willett to Lucy
Broadwood, 1891



- 'Old style of singing' started to be replaced by 'regular singing', 'Reformation' tunes used for both. **Simultaneity of different practices**
- Emphasis on volume:
 - c. 1765: 'Harsh and disagreeable sounds.'
 - 1775: 'There are many in our congregations who **seem to think they sing best, when they sing loudest**. You may see them often strain themselves with **shouting, till their faces are as red as scarlet**'
 - 1825: '...the old style of psalmody without an organ, with two or three, or half a score **lusty fellows roaring out** the strains of Sternhold and Hopkins...'
- Emphasis on **full chest-voice production** and some degree of **melodic decoration**, such as swoops and turns and end of line upward jerks.
- These features clear where the older styles of British church music have **survived**, e.g. in the heterophonic, **lining-out traditions** of the Isle of Lewis and among some Old Regular Baptist congregations in the US South. Reluctance of musicologists to use evidence from surviving examples, e.g. **US shape note music**



Sam Willett
in the door of
his bakery,
Cuckfield,
Sussex

Opposition to and the Elimination of the Popular Church Music:

1. Early Opposition

- Some moves to reform in early C18th – in Britain and USA – predates choir bands
- ‘To many new incumbents, the dislocation from Oxbridge cloister to village green came as a considerable **culture shock**’ (Robert Lee, 2006). Increased clergy intervention from c. 1830.
- Opposition in later C18th and French Wars period – ultimately, successful reform, but stalled in war period – sermons, pamphlets, books, charity children, practical work. Renewed activity from c.1820.
- Reform never straightforward, messy and irregular. ‘**History knows no regular verbs**’ (E P Thompson, 1978)
- Some key movers:
 - William Vincent, *Considerations on Parochial Music* (second edn.; London, 1787)
 - Beilby Porteus, reprinted sermons c. 1790
 - Edward Miller, *Thoughts on the Present Performance of Psalmody in the Established Church of England* (London 1791).

[7]
this has introduced an attempt towards a remedy,
which is worfe than the evil.

This confists principally of two parts, which
shall be denominated *abuses*, not in a bad sense,
but as a perverted use of a good practice.

The first is, the Select Band of the country
Church.

The second, the Charity Children in the Me-
tropolis.

The first of these abuses cannot be better de-
scribed than in the following words,—“ * Here
“ devotion is lost between the impotent vanity
“ of those who sing, and the ignorant wonder
“ of those who listen;” and it is really matter of
astonishment that either the minister, or the better
part of the congregation have suffered this evil
to encrease to the extent it has : that at the same
time both complain that their ears are wounded
with dissonance, and their ideas degraded to ridi-
cule ; neither the minister has exerted his influ-
ence, or the congregation claimed their right,
but have tamely suffered themselves to be pre-
cluded from a duty specially their own, and the
service to be lengthened, (as it sometimes is un-
reasonably) by a practice that adds renfold to
the tedium of it.

The

* Dr. Brown:

Opposition to and the Elimination of the Popular Church Music:

2. Elimination

- 1820s-1860s
- Piecemeal and varied across country, linked with new forms of religiosity (Oxford Movement) – young clergymen from college, sometimes financial support from better-off parishoners
- '[t]he first thing our new parson did was to try to rule the singing' James Nye (1822=1892) *A Small Account of my Travels through the Wilderness* (manuscript)
- M A Scargill, 1835:
 - **'... mules are celebrated for their pertinacity, and donkeys for their stupidity; but all the pigs, rams, mules, and asses in the world, put together, would be more easily managed than a company of singers in a village church'**
- John Mason Neale 1843, railed against choir bands and galleries:
 - **Removed too great distance from the clergyman's eye, having a separate entrance to their seats, possessed of strong *esprit du corps*, and feeling or thinking themselves indispensable to the performance of a certain part of public worship, and too often, alas! privileged to decide what that part shall be, — what wonder if they generally acquire those feelings of independence and pride, which make the singers some of the worst members of the parish. The radicalism both of singers and of bell-ringers is notorious.**

Some key movers:

John Antes La Trobe, *The Music of the Church* (1831)

The Parish Choir (magazine)

Church Choral Unions

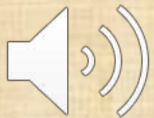


John Mason Neal 1818-1866

Opposition to and the Elimination of the Popular Church Music 3: **Did they go 'often without complaint' or were they pushed?**

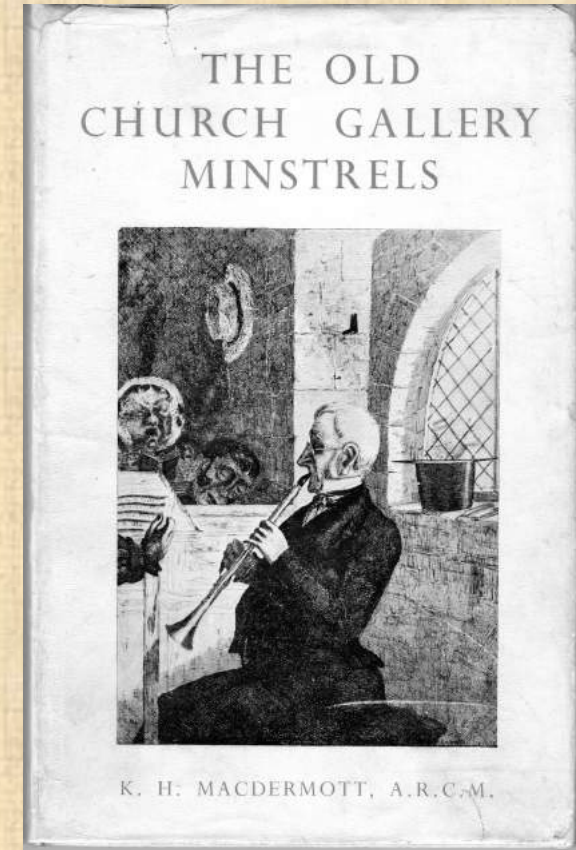
- Key argument
- Conflicts regularly occur in church life.
- Christopher Turner: church musicians suffered a 'decline in their morale' and, 'unable to sustain themselves [...] bowed to the pressure of change and relinquished their role in the gallery – **often without complaint**'
- **Many well documented cases** of overt expulsion, often linked with other parish tensions
 - Clipstone (Northants) 1820, new vicar Rev John Bull abolished choir, satirical verses & songs, demonstrations, magistrate's court. Parish never reconciled
 - Chardstock (Dorset) 1822, dispute between ringers/singers and curate – church choir-band walk out, court, judge rules for curate
 - Fordington (Dorset) 1829, choir-band fell out with vicar, went on strike, halving congregation, vicar demolished west gallery, old choir stoned the vicarage
 - Stow-in-Lindsey, (Lincs) 1836, long running village hostilities after perpetual curate removed gallery
 - East Chiltington (E Sussex) James Nye, (c. 1850s) left CoE and joined an independent chapel
 - Walsingham (Norfolk), November 5th, 1866, **blowing up of new church organ**
- Conflicts never simple. Hostility, church music reform, changes in musical fashion, social changes, lack of morale and support – **but sometimes they complained vigorously!**
- Indicates some **overt and covert opposition** to change.
- Overall change undeniable: **Around 1800 choir-bands and select singers were relatively common, but by 1870 they were little but memories.** This at a period when others amateur music-making was flourishing.

'Abide with Me'
Lyte & Monk,
1847/1861
Choir, organ
congregation –
Victorian
Anglican ideal?



West Gallery Literature and Scholarship

- Triumphalist and **mocking accounts of progress of church music** (often sermons at choir festivals, 1860s-90s)
- West Gallery music features in some significant **C19th literature** e.g. Washington Irving, Thomas Hardy, George Eliot, magazine stories.
 - **Stupidity and stubbornness of rustics**
 - **Symbolic of wide social change – old church music represents lost world**
- Factual antiquarianism:
 - Rev Francis Galpin (1883 and 1906); Canon K H MacDermott, (1923 and 1948)
- Serious scholarship:
 - Vic Gammon, MA 1978; Nicholas Temperley, 1979; Rollo Woods 1995; and Christopher Turner ed. 1997; PhDs in recent years by Stephen Weston, 1995; Sally Drage, 2000; Katie Holland, 2010. Hertfordshire book by Maggie Kilbey, 2020.
- Different priorities of antiquarians, musicologists and historians, different approaches and emphases.



Survival and Revival

- Carol traditions: South Yorkshire and Derbyshire, West Country, Padstow, Copper family, Shape Note tradition in USA. Residual survivals. When does survival become revival?
- Some incorporation into carols collections, *New Oxford Book of Carols* 1992
- Revival groups from 1970s: The Madding Crowd, 1975, Hope in the Valley, 1978.
- West Gallery Music Association, 1990 – notables included Gordon Ashman, Dave Townsend, Rollo Woods, Edwin Macadam, Sheila Girling Smith, Mike Bailey
- Now over 30 groups listed; questions over style authenticity, dress, recontextualization, performance for audience, localism.





Reverse
recap of
examples

Concluding Remarks – emergent understanding

- West Gallery movement has brought to light **‘a whole musical culture that had been almost entirely forgotten’** (Temperley)
- Done within pressures and confines of revivalism
- Genuine understanding or nostalgic longing?
 - Lot of interest antiquarian and performative in nature [‘Making up and showing off’ - Jason Toynbee]
- Does not invalidate the discovery of something
 - previously ignored and/or written off by conventional music histories
 - Rich, dynamic, sometimes exciting and interesting
- Question of relationship to traditional song – more to explore



I will send a pdf version of these slides to anyone interested. Email: vic.gammon@icloud.com