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## Is the classic Christmas choirboy endangered?

By Josephine McDermott  
BBC News, London



On thin ice? The Chapel Royal choir at Hampton Court Palace is hoping to safeguard its future

Gareth Malone and his choir of military wives may be about to top the charts at Christmas, but for the more traditional choirs times are harder.

Churches and cathedrals are likely to be packed for carol concerts at this time of year, sung by choirs established up to 500 years ago.

But many of those choirs are finding it increasingly difficult to find the boys aged seven to 13 to lend their distinctive, unbroken treble voices.

Churches say they are competing against the "religion of football", shopping on Sundays and the perception that singing in choirs is a "bit sissy".

And with classical music training increasingly disappearing from schools some groups are having to think carefully about how to safeguard the "traditional" choirs of English cathedrals, collegiate churches and Chapels Royal.


But the debate begins with defining what exactly that is.

The Campaign for the Traditional Cathedral Choir firmly believes it involves an all-male line-up and says: "The future of the English choirboy is increasingly in doubt."

### 'Subtly different'

Peter Giles who started the group 14 years ago, believes choirboys may be gone in a generation's time and in the majority of parish churches all-male choirs have already vanished.

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He estimates there are only eight or nine cathedrals in England where females do not now sing with males.

This year the choirs of Peterborough, Lincoln and Durham cathedrals were among those who allowed either girls or women to sing, or for women to play the organ, for the first time.

Mr Giles stresses that his is not a sexist argument.

"The beauty of boys' voices is that they sound subtly different," he said.

"If you blend them with girls' you miss the best parts of both and don't get the characteristic sound."

The choir of the Chapel Royal at Hampton Court Palace in west London has launched a choral foundation.

Its aim is to ensure the music of the chapel, which dates back to 1528, with its organ and choir of 'boys' and 'gentlemen', exists "in perpetuity".

To do that it is raising money, in part to be able to pay the adult professionals in the choir competitively, and to offer more training to young boys to make the choir more "aspirational".

Jon Round, chairman of the New Choral Foundation, said: "Anecdotally, it is hard to find and attract boys to this kind of music and so one of the reasons we are doing what we are doing is to tackle that."

### 'Football is religion'

Canon Denis Mulliner, Chaplain of The Chapel Royal, bemoans the fact that for many boys "football is their religion" and people "go shopping" on Sundays nowadays.

The Chapel Royal choir at Hampton Court Palace has the capacity for 16 boys, but in the last decade numbers have been as low as half that.

To counter this, some choirs have introduced girls but, some have found that when this happens, the number of boys attending gradually drops.

Mr Giles said: "The number one reason why boys are not joining choirs is because girls are being allowed to join and they are not wanting to do something seen as sissy.

"A pre-pubescent boy needs to be in a team, and it needs to be a boys' team."

But Charles Taylor, Dean of Peterborough Cathedral, which this year admitted its first seven-year-old girls to its choir, said if it is managed well, the introduction of girls does not have to mean the departure of boys.

The choir has accepted 11-year-old girls for the last 18 years.

He said: "The last seven words of a dying institution are, 'We have always done it this way'.

"We have to be open to new things so that the worship and music can continue.

"The principle is that it is the voice that matters, not the gender."

He added that the choir at Peterborough Cathedral had no problem



It is the 'voice that matters, not gender', says the Dean of Peterborough Cathedral



The last seven words of a dying institution are 'We have always done it this way'"

Charles Taylor

Dean of Peterborough Cathedral

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recruiting boys but that with the experience of singing being on the decline in schools, it was important that the cathedral could offer it.

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