



Travels with William Byrd

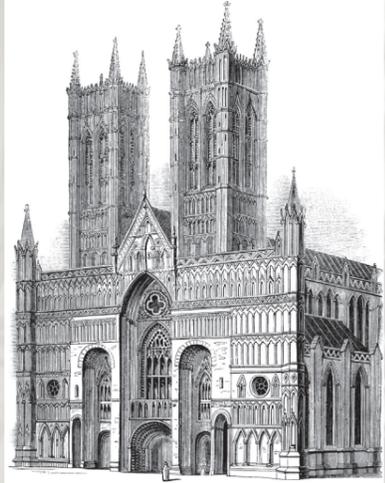
Andrew Carwood



William Byrd (1539 - 1623)

The decision to perform every note of William Byrd's Latin church music in a series of concerts around the UK seemed a logical next step for The Cardinal's Musick. Having completed a thirteen CD survey of the music in Latin we were struck not only by the astonishingly high quality of the compositions but also by the sophistication of the composer's wit and the intensity of his emotion. Too little of this great man's music is heard regularly and the Byrd Tour 2012 hopes to redress this situation with sixteen concerts around the UK which will allow every note of his music in Latin to be heard in the space of one year. Central to this tour are performances in some of the places which were important to Byrd and his supporters - Standon Massey (Essex), Winchester, Fotheringhay and Arundel.

Byrd probably spent most of his early to middle life in London. His two brothers were choristers at St Paul's Cathedral and Byrd himself must surely have had some musical education as a boy but no records have yet come to light to show in which institution this took place.



Lincoln Cathedral ('Old England; A Pictorial Museum' 1845 - Charles Knight)

After a brief time as Organist of Lincoln Cathedral, he returned to London in 1572 to become a Gentleman of the Chapel Royal (in succession to Robert Parsons) and remained

in the capital until his removal to the rural haven of Standon Massey.

This village is but a few miles from Ingatestone Hall, the home of the Petre family and a centre for Catholic activity in the area. Byrd seems to have been a regular visitor at the Hall from about 1586 onwards and he spent the whole of the Christmas season there in 1589. It may be that Byrd was tired of life in London or was unhappy at the increasing anti-Catholic bias of the government but in either case he moved to Standon Massey permanently from about 1594. Much of his music from this point would have been inspired by, if not directly written for, the clandestine services which took place around Ingatestone, including the three settings of the Mass and the two books of Gradualia published in 1605 and 1607. In his will, Byrd asked to be buried in Standon Massey near his wife. It is unlikely that the Parish Church was the site of his burial - Byrd



Page from Byrd's 'Gradualia'

repeatedly refused to attend the services there and received a large number of censures for this - but his body must surely lie in the locality.

At least two of the venues on this tour were important centres for the Catholic cause at various times throughout the sixteenth century. Winchester Cathedral was the venue for Mary I's wedding to Philip II of Spain on 25th July 1554. Philip had arrived at Southampton on 19th July and Mary was keen to have a sumptuous wedding as quickly as possible, hence the choice of nearby Winchester rather than London: the couple met just two days before the celebration.

It is likely that the young Byrd was a chorister somewhere in London, possibly even at the Chapel Royal and this would explain how he came into contact with Thomas Tallis.



Thomas Tallis (c.1505 - 1585)

It is likely therefore that they both sang at the great wedding in Winchester and at the various celebrations in London thereafter. It would also explain how Byrd met Phillippe de Monte, the only non-Spanish musician in Philip II's sizeable musical entourage, with whom he was to exchange music in years to come.

Mary's marriage to Philip did not give her the great support and love for which she longed and her restoration of

Catholicism to England did not survive her own death. Her lasting legacy may well be the explosion in composition during her reign as composers were once again able to write more substantial pieces in Latin and could give free reign to their imaginations. Byrd wrote a funeral elegy for Queen Mary (Crowned with flowers and lilies) although he did not publish it until 1611, once Elizabeth had passed away and James I sat on the throne of England.

James's mother, Mary Queen of Scots, had a difficult and troubled life. Blessed with beauty and an attractiveness which men found difficult to resist, sadly she was not given the gift of a steady head. A queen in her own right and cousin to Elizabeth she was a rallying point for disaffected English Catholics and a thorn in her cousin's side. Inevitably plots grew around her and at least one of Byrd's near neighbours in Standon Massey had been connected with an