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Chapel Royal (Royal Household Chapel)

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Chapel Royal (Royal Household Chapel)

The household chapel of the English kings, a special group of personnel always in attendance on the ruler whose principal responsibility was to perform the divine service. The Chapel Royal is to be distinguished from two other major royal chapels of fixed abode founded by Edward III, the royal chapels of St. Stephen's at Westminster and St. George's at Windsor; its clerks and their duties are further to be distinguished from the King's Chaplains (a position emerging in the 1390s). There had always been chaplains at court who served the king, holding a variety of administrative responsibilities and functioning in a liturgical or ceremonial capacity as necessary. As a more specialized body the Chapel Royal was put on a new footing in the 13th century, in particular as documented in the 1270s during the reign of Edward I, from which time it may have begun to perform daily services. Though liturgical celebration was its day-to-day role, the most important function of the Chapel Royal was in fulfilling ceremonial needs as an emblem of kingship and of the royal presence at coronation ceremonies, crown wearings, solemn entries, anniversaries and commemorations, and other major state occasions.

The adult membership of the Chapel Royal consisted of ordained chaplains and lay clerks (the "capellani et clerici capelle domini regis"), who were joined from the early 14th century onward by a contingent of boys. Their numbers varied but were always substantial by contemporary standards; there were over 30 adults and ten boys in the mid-15th century. The Chapel Royal was the primary sphere of activity for a number of known composers, and it engaged in the performance of the most challenging polyphonic scores. Nonetheless, these activities may have preoccupied only a minority of its members; others, content to sing plainsong as demanded, became engaged in additional nonmusical activities at court, using their position simply as "one of a number of appropriate starting points for clerical careers in royal service" (Wathey:83). Two 15th-century accounts of the composition and duties of the chapel are in the *Liber regie capelle* (1449) and the Black Book of the Household of Edward IV (ca. 1471).

Peter M. Lefferts

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