

1998

Lady Chapel

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Lefferts, Peter M., "Lady Chapel" (1998). *Faculty Publications: School of Music*. 42.
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Lady Chapel

A distinctive formal feature of English Gothic church architecture; provision of a Lady Chapel was a central objective of the campaigns of choir remodeling and eastern extension that altered the floorplans of most English cathedrals and abbey churches from the later 12th through the 14th century. The Lady Chapel, a large hall church of roughly the same dimensions as the choir itself, was most frequently located in a rectangular space thrusting eastward from the east end of the choir. In churches laid out like Salisbury this was a low, projecting space emerging from the main mass of the building by only a few bays, as at Salisbury itself, or almost entirely freestanding, as at Gloucester or Westminster. High projecting Lady Chapels sustained the roofline of the main building, as at Bristol or Worcester. A second popular location for the Lady Chapel was in the place of honor immediately beneath the east window in churches with an aisled rectangle plan and flush east end, as at York. There are a number of common exceptions to these schemes of eastern axial placement, the most significant being north of the choir in a location east of the north transept, as at Ely.

The rapid proliferation of Lady Chapels in England is tangible expression of the intensification of devotion to the Virgin Mary in later medieval England and the pressure to house new Marian liturgies (in particular the daily morning Lady Mass and evening Salve service) in appropriate spaces. An element of popular demand for access to worship services may have also played a role (an issue that needs more scholarly exploration); certainly in abbeys and cathedrals the chapel became an important place of worship for pilgrims and the local laity, especially devout women, and a center of guild and confraternity activities. Archival data establishes the endowing of choirs (including boys) and the presence of organs in the Lady Chapel from an early date, and by the 15th century in many places the master of the Lady Chapel's music became the highest-ranking practicing musician in ecclesiastical service. A considerable portion of the medieval English repertoire of polyphonic mass music and Marian antiphons was composed for performance in the Lady Chapel.

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Published in *Medieval England: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Paul Szarmach, M. Teresa Tavormina, Joel T. Rosenthal, Catherine E. Karkov, Peter M. Lefferts, & Elizabeth Parker McLachlan (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), p. 400. Copyright © 1998 Paul Szarmach, M. Teresa Tavormina, & Joel T. Rosenthal.