

THE BOY BISHOP TRADITION IS a medieval custom whereby choristers took over on The Holy Innocents Day (28 January) as part of Festival of Fools from Boxing Day to New Year's Day. Church authorities successfully banned most of what happened as much was associated with ancient, pre-Christian revels from the 12th Century. The exception were festivities on Holy Innocents Day, the day when the Boy Bishop ruled which continued well into the sixteenth century.

The tradition had huge popular appeal. The Boy Bishop was elected on 6 December (the feast of St Nicholas) by fellow choristers, giving him time to prepare for the responsibilities that lay ahead. The services presided over by him and his 'canons' – other choristers chose to help – were serious acts of worship with the Bishop clothed in full pontificals, mitred and with the episcopal ring on his finger. He and his team led the prayers and the Boy Bishop preached a sermon.

He even received the offerings although chapters and precentors did their best to divert the money – at Salisbury this ranged from £2.6s in a bad year to £5.6.8d from a more generous congregation.

The fun started outside the cathedral, when the Bishop and his Canons were feted by senior clergy. One York Boy Bishop went on an episcopal visitation for the best part of a month during which time he successfully 'extracted' money from a host of different people in Yorkshire. This sort of behaviour eventually led to church authorities trying to stop the tradition, not least because its popularity was such that it "proved an affront to the Protestant mind, which could not tolerate the cohabitation of religion and fun".

The tradition was banned by royal proclamation on 22 July 1541.

You can read more about Boy Bishops and their antics in Alan Mould's excellent history of the choristers – *The English Chorister*, published by Hambledon Continuum - ISBN 1-85285-513-4 or available from Amazon.

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