

John Taverner

His Life and Music

Hugh Benham



An **Ashgate** Book

JOHN TAVERNER

In memory of my parents, Raymond George Benham and
Grace Benham

John Taverner

His Life and Music

HUGH BENHAM

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List of Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in the Notes. The Bibliography gives full publication details.

- CMM* = *Corpus Mensurabilis Musicae*
DNB = *The Dictionary of National Biography*
ECP = *English Choral Practice, 1400–1650*
EECM = *Early English Church Music*
EMc = *Early Music*
JAMS = *Journal of the American Musicological Society*
JT = Josephson, *John Taverner, Tudor Composer*
LCM = Benham, *Latin Church Music in England c. 1460–1575*
LP = *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of the Reign of Henry VIII*
LRS = *The Publications of the Lincoln Record Society*
MB = *Musica Britannica*
MD = *Musica Disciplina*
ML = *Music & Letters*
MMB = Harrison, *Music in Medieval Britain*, 2, 1963
MME = *Monumentos de la Música Española*
MP = Stevens, *Music and Poetry in the Early Tudor Court*, 2, 1979
MR = *The Music Review*
MRE = *Music and the Reformation in England 1549–1660*
MT = *The Musical Times*
NG 2001 = *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2, 2001
NRSV = *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*
PRMA = *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association*
RMARC = *Royal Musical Association Research Chronicle*
RRMR = *Recent Researches in the Music of the Renaissance*
SOED = *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*
TCM = *Tudor Church Music*
VCH = *Victoria County History of the County of Lincoln*

The following library sigla are used in the text, in the tables and in the Notes. All are *GB*- (Great Britain) unless otherwise shown.

- CF* Chelmsford, Essex County Record Office
Cgc Cambridge, Gonville and Caius College

| | |
|----------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Cjc</i> | ____, St John's College |
| <i>Ckc</i> | ____, King's College, Rowe Music Library |
| <i>Cmc</i> | ____, Magdalene College, Pepys Library |
| <i>Cp</i> | ____, Peterhouse, Library |
| <i>Cu</i> | ____, University Library |
| <i>D-Kl</i> | Germany, Kassel, Gesamthochschul-Bibliothek, Landesbibliothek und Murhardsche Bibliothek, Musiksammlung |
| <i>I-Rvat</i> | Italy, Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana |
| <i>Llao</i> | Lincoln, Archives Office |
| <i>Lbl</i> | London, British Library |
| <i>Lcm</i> | ____, Royal College of Music, Library |
| <i>Llp</i> | ____, Lambeth Palace Library |
| <i>Lpro</i> | ____, Public Record Office |
| <i>Ob</i> | Oxford, Bodleian Library |
| <i>Ocb</i> | ____, Christ Church Library |
| <i>US-NYpl</i> | United States of America, New York, Public Library, Center for the Humanities |
| <i>WB</i> | Wimborne, Dorset |
| <i>WRec</i> | Windsor, Eton College, College Library |

Acknowledgements

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I am very grateful for the assistance of the staff of the British Library, the Public Record Office, Lincolnshire Archives, the Library of the Royal College of Music, the Hartley Library in the University of Southampton, the Hampshire County Library, and the Thorold and Lyttelton Library, Winchester, and for the advice and support of everyone at Ashgate.

The music examples have been beautifully set by Mr Timothy Symons. Those derived from *Early English Church Music* are © The British Academy, and are reproduced by permission of Stainer & Bell Ltd, London, England. Those from *Musica Britannica* are © The Musica Britannica Trust, and are reproduced by permission of Stainer & Bell Ltd, London, England. Ex. 13.3 is from The Byrd Edition © Stainer & Bell.

I wish to thank the Bodleian Library, Oxford for permission to include Plate 1 from their MS Mus. Sch. E. 377, f. 4r, and Plate 2 from Mus. Sch. E. 379, f. 4r; the British Library for Plates 3, 6 and 8; the Master and Fellows of Peterhouse, Cambridge for Plate 4; the Master and Fellows of St John's College, Cambridge for Plate 5, and the Governing Body of Christ Church for Plate 7 (the first page of item 133 from MS 979).

My wife Fiona and daughter Rosemary were very patient and provided invaluable support throughout the three years in which the book was written.

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Introduction

John Taverner, one of England's most important composers, was the outstanding figure between John Dunstaple (c.1390–1453) and Thomas Tallis (c.1505–85). Born almost certainly in the 1490s, he composed music for the pre-Reformation Latin liturgy and its associated devotions, excelling in the three principal genres of mass, votive antiphon and Magnificat, as well as contributing significantly to other liturgical types, and writing some secular music. His musical career, spent successively at Tattershall, Oxford and Boston, was fairly short, for he died in 1545, having apparently been occupied with business dealings and civic duties for some years before this. Taverner had a key role in the consolidation and development of musical style in early Tudor England. In some of his greatest works, such as the mass *Corona spinea*, he refined the florid style developed by the composers of the Eton choirbook in the closing years of the fifteenth century. But particularly in a few shorter works he employed techniques that the younger composers Christopher Tye, Thomas Tallis and John Sheppard were to exploit more fully.

Between the early seventeenth century and the first quarter of the twentieth, little attention was paid to Taverner's music. The single most important event in its revival was the publication of the *Tudor Church Music* (*TCM*) edition in 1923–24. There was an upsurge of scholarly activity in the 1960s and 1970s, with doctoral dissertations by David S. Josephson and myself, and monographs by Josephson and Colin Hand. Since that time the biographical details have been supplemented and reinterpreted by Roger Bowers in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* of 1980, and my complete edition for *Early English Church Music* (*EECM*) of 1978–90 has made readily performable those works for the Office that require plainsong passages not given in the original manuscript sources or in *TCM*. Most important of all, choirs who specialize in 'early music' have, often in recorded performances, enabled more people to hear Taverner's music than ever heard it in his lifetime.

The principal feature of the present book is more extensive writing on the music than in either previous monograph. In the first five chapters I set the music in context. Chapter 1 examines Taverner's personal and working life, and includes a few fresh pieces of biographical information. Chapter 2 explains the varied nature of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century musical

sources in which the music has been preserved, and in Table 2.1 provides a listing of all these sources. Chapter 3 considers some performance issues. Chapter 4 shows in general terms how Taverner's sacred music fitted into the services and devotions of the church. Explanations of liturgical terms, many of which will not be universally familiar, are worked into the body of the text or provided in the Notes. Table 4.1 has a full listing of music ascribed to Taverner, including those pieces now known to be by other composers. The authenticity of several works is open to question, and this is signalled both in Table 4.1 and in Table 2.1, in advance of discussion in later chapters. Chapter 5 explores Taverner's musical background, notably with reference to the composers represented in the Eton choirbook.

Study of Taverner's style and technique begins in Chapter 6 with detailed examination of the votive antiphon *Gaude plurimum*, a work that circulated widely in the sixteenth century. My aim has been to comment on a wide range of musical features in language accessible not only to specialists but to many readers acquainted principally with music of, say, the last three centuries. Considerable use of technical language is of course unavoidable, but descriptions of harmonic and tonal events include, quite deliberately, anachronistic references to triads, perfect cadences, D minor tonality, and so on, to render unfamiliar processes reasonably straightforward, especially as there are no early sixteenth-century English writings to indicate quite how Taverner did conceive of such matters. Explanations of some terms appear in the text or in the Notes, and further references are given to the 2001 edition of *The New Grove (NG 2001)*. The general reader may occasionally find it useful to have at hand some more compact musical dictionary or encyclopaedia.

Chapter 6 provides points of reference for later chapters. In other words, it may be assumed that other works are broadly similar in style and technique to *Gaude plurimum* except where attention is drawn to differences. Taverner's other votive antiphons are considered in Chapters 7 and 8, his masses in Chapters 9 and 10. The works for the Office are examined in Chapter 11, the songs in Chapter 12. A difficulty throughout is the lack of precise information about the chronology of Taverner's work, which severely restricts our understanding of how his musical style developed. In Chapter 13, however, the various deductions made earlier are gathered together into Table 13.1, before a summary of the composer's achievement and influence is attempted, and the reception of his music from early times is outlined.

Numerous music examples are provided, to illustrate points made, and to enable readers who so wish to pursue, without a complete edition in front of them, their own further investigations into the processes that make Taverner's music so enriching and fulfilling five centuries on from its composition.

Note on editorial policy

With one or two exceptions, music examples from Taverner are based on *EECM*, but with the original note values restored. This is intended to aid understanding of the compositional process by avoiding the inconsistency of that edition, in which some works are presented with the original values quartered, others with values halved. Parts printed in small type are editorial reconstructions of lost material. The *EECM* bar numbering is used in music examples, in comment on them, and in tables; elsewhere, as a rule, specific passages are identified by their words, for the convenience of those without ready access to the edition. Translations of the Latin texts of music examples are given where it is considered necessary or useful. Full translations of most texts are available in the *EECM* edition; for the ordinary of the Mass, the Magnificat and the Te Deum, readers may refer to Roman Catholic or Church of England service books.

There are a few quotations from composers other than Taverner. These, again with original note values, are derived from *EECM*, *Musica Britannica* (*MB*) or *The Byrd Edition* where possible, but a few are newly edited from manuscript sources.

In the text voices are referred to by the names used in *EECM* (treble, mean, countertenor, tenor and bass) as the nearest equivalents in English to the designations used by Taverner and his contemporaries. Where precise pitches need to be identified, the Helmholtz system is employed: in terms of this the range of the mass *Corona spinea* is $F-g''$.

Composers' names are spelled generally as in *NG 2001*. Titles of pieces are italicized, except where the title is also the name of a type of work such as the Magnificat or In Nomine. The spelling of sixteenth-century documents in English has been modernized, and punctuation added, except where there is good reason to retain the original, notably in the case of poetry. Dates are given according to the modern reckoning, with, for example, 1 January 1526 not 1 January 1525/6.

As a rule, the first reference to a manuscript in each chapter is by name together with the RISM (Répertoire International des Sources Musicales) abbreviation of the library's location and name, and the call number. For example, the six partbooks at the Bodleian Library that contain Taverner's masses *Gloria tibi Trinitas*, *Corona spinea* and *O Michael* appear as 'the Forrest-Heyther partbooks (*Ob Mus. Sch. E. 376–81*)'. Second and subsequent references, and those in the Notes, are normally further abbreviated, as for example '*Ob 376–81*'. There is a key to RISM location references in the List of Abbreviations, which also explains abbreviations used in the Notes.

Titles of works correspond generally with those of the *EECM* edition. The most important exceptions concern those works for the Office where an *EECM* title includes words for which Taverner did not supply polyphony.

Sospitati dedit aegros is therefore the work that was referred to in *EECM* as *Ex ejus tumba – Sospitati dedit aegros* after its initial plainsong and its polyphonic continuation. *Gloria in excelsis* is named after the verse that Taverner set, not as in *EECM* after the respond *Hodie nobis caelorum rex* to which this verse belonged. *Ecce mater* was *Ecce carissimi* in *EECM*.

It has not been considered necessary to include in the Notes page references to the *EECM* Taverner edition, or to complete editions of music by other composers where only passing reference to a work is made.

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Chapter 1

The Life of John Taverner

In 1524 John Taverner from Tattershall in Lincolnshire visited the Church of St Botolph in nearby Boston as a guest singer. Not long afterwards he accepted a much more important invitation, to become instructor of the choristers at the newly-founded Cardinal College, Oxford. In the 1530s he settled in Boston, at first continuing to work as a musician. He prospered, and eventually served as one of the aldermen of the newly-incorporated borough for a few months before his death in October 1545.

Although, as this very brief outline suggests, biographical information is limited – we know nothing of his activities before 1524 – more can be learned about Taverner than about any earlier English musician. For example, little is recorded of Robert Fayrfax, the most highly regarded composer of the preceding generation, beyond his presence at certain important state occasions and various payments made to him. But in Taverner's case we have three letters in his own hand, while other contemporary letters and legal documents give further indications of his activities and perhaps even the odd glimpse of his character, pointing to a man well regarded by his contemporaries and possessed of considerable business sense.

It is tempting to believe that there are clues to his physical appearance in drawings at the head of the mass *Gloria tibi Trinitas* in five of the Forrest-Heyther partbooks (*Ob Mus. Sch. E.* 376–80), but these may not have been intended to represent him or anyone else. Two of the drawings are shown in Plates 1 and 2.

John Taverner appears to have come from south Lincolnshire, but there is no indication of his parentage: indeed the surname Taverner was uncommon in that area.¹ According to one of his own letters, he was related to the Yerburghs, a well-to-do Lincolnshire family.² He may also have been connected with a less prosperous family of Taverners who lived at Tattershall, but the William who made a will in 1556 was not necessarily his brother.³ John was sometimes referred to as 'of Boston',⁴ but this may mean only that he lived there in later years. As a boy he may well have been a chorister in a large choral institution such as Tattershall Collegiate Church (although he is not named in the incomplete records for 1492–1507)⁵ or St Botolph's in Boston.

Taverner was probably born in the 1490s rather than in the 1470s or 1480s,

Gloria tibi trinitas. Quod spiritus d'aurar. f'f'ho p'mo

E in ter ra pax homi nib' bone voluntat'.

Ee gratias agim' domi ne de us rex celest'.

ti' de us pater omni po tens Do mi ne de us agni'

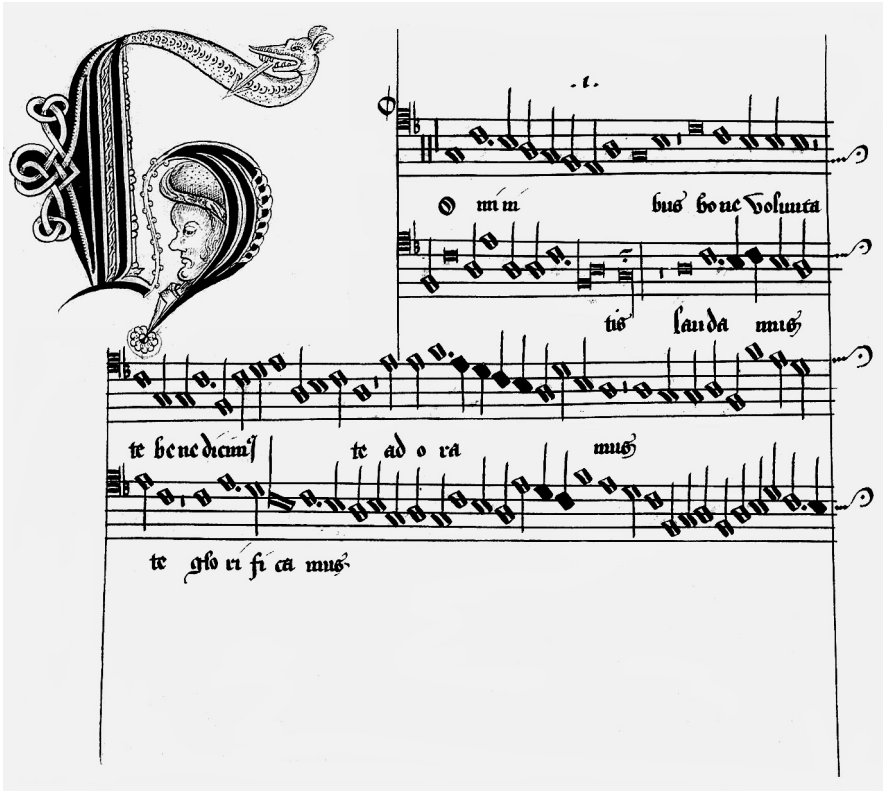
den fi lius pa tris Qui tol lis pec ca ta mun di

1 Ornamental capital E in *Ob Mus. Sch. E. 377*, with the beginning of the cantus firmus of the mass *Gloria tibi Trinitas*

because important works began to appear only in manuscripts of the 1520s. He had established enough of a reputation by 1525 to be invited to serve as instructor of the choristers at Cardinal College, which suggests that he was born no later than about 1495. William Taverner his brother was said to be 'forty years and more' in October 1546, but this conventional expression need not have meant 'in his forties' with a date of birth between 1497 and 1506: he could have been in his fifties.⁶

The John Taverner who joined the Fraternity of St Nicholas, the London Guild of Parish Clerks, in 1514⁷ was not the composer. While the guild's bed-roll, a list of people to be prayed for, does contain the names of some eminent composers, John and his wife Agnes appear in a section reserved for non-musicians.⁸ At least one John Taverner who was not a musician is known to have lived in London at that time;⁹ and there is no other reason to connect the composer with the capital in the early or mid 1510s.

John Taverner was a professional musician until the 1530s. All three



2 Ornamental capital H in *Ob Mus. Sch. E. 379*, with the beginning of the tenor part of the mass *Gloria tibi Trinitas*

institutions at which he worked offered extensive opportunities for the performance and composition of sacred music, although all references to his musical life concern his activities as a singer or teacher, not as a composer. Composing seems not to have been regarded as a primary or even an important requirement in a church musician.¹⁰

It is not known how long before 1524 Taverner joined the choir of Tattershall Collegiate Church.¹¹ In May 1525, when the bishop of Lincoln's chancellor conducted a visitation,¹² he was still one of the adult singers, or clerk fellows (but there is nothing to indicate which part he sang). His yearly salary was £6. He would have received £2 more if, as seems likely, he was organist or instructor of the choristers.¹³

Tattershall was a more important centre than the present-day visitor might imagine. In the early 1400s the manor had belonged to Ralph, third baron Cromwell, a member of the Council of Regents in Henry VI's reign and

Treasurer of England from 1433 to 1443; it was he who enlarged the castle, founded a grammar school and an almshouse, and rebuilt the parish church.¹⁴ The new collegiate foundation was intended to have seven chaplains, six lay clerks and six boy choristers, the clerks and choristers forming a choir capable of regularly singing polyphony. By the early sixteenth century the choir was larger, with up to ten clerks and ten choristers, large numbers by contemporary standards.

The daily pattern of services and other devotions was extensive. According to the statutes of c.1460, it began as early as five o'clock in the morning on weekdays, with the choristers saying Matins and hours of the Virgin. The final act of the day was a votive antiphon after Vespers and Compline sung by the choristers at the image of the Virgin in the Lady Chapel. Two masses and the services of Prime, Terce, Sext and None were said, but Matins, High Mass, Vespers and Compline were sung, as was the Litany on most Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. It was only at the Lady Mass that the statutes expressly required polyphony, assuming that the expression 'cum cantu organico et organis' means 'in polyphony and with organ'. By the 1490s the choir possessed settings of the Mass ordinary, votive antiphons and other pieces with special ceremonial, particularly for Holy Week and Easter. So if Taverner had been admitted as a boy he would have enjoyed an excellent musical upbringing. Later there was much to engage him as a singer and as a composer.

In 1526 Taverner moved from Tattershall to become *informator choristarum* (instructor of the choristers) at the newly-founded Cardinal College in Oxford. As at Tattershall, choristers were the boy singers, not the men, who were termed clerks: Taverner was first among equals so far as they were concerned. It was presumably to the Cardinal College post that John Baldwin referred in the partbook *Och* 983: the votive antiphon *Gaude plurimum* is attributed there to 'mr john tavernar of cardinall wolsayes chappell who died at bostone and there lieth'. Taverner is not known to have sung in Wolsey's household chapel, although some temporary association is possible.¹⁵

The founder of the college, Cardinal Thomas Wolsey, had entrusted the recruitment of the choir and its instructor to the bishop of Lincoln, John Longland, in whose diocese Oxford then was. It appears from Wolsey's letter of 4 September 1525 that Longland had arranged for some priests and singers to begin residence by 25 March 1526, even though the opening of the college had been deferred 'till about the feast of Saint Frideswide', 19 October 1526.¹⁶ So far no instructor had been appointed, for Longland had been unsuccessful in his approach to Hugh Aston (c.1485–1558) of Leicester. It is not surprising that Aston was initially preferred to Taverner, as he was probably some years Taverner's senior, and was a Bachelor of Music of the University of Oxford.¹⁷ Longland then called for Taverner, perhaps on the strength of good reports

from the recent Tattershall visitation. But again there was an unfavourable answer, as Longland informed Wolsey on 17 October 1525:

It may please you to understand [that] Taverner, a singing man whom I sent for by virtue of the king's commission to have been informant of the children of your chapel in your honourable college at Oxford (who no doubt of [it] is very meet for the same), I can in no wise have his good will thereunto. He allegeth the assurance and profit of his living at Tattershall: and that he is in way of a good marriage which he should lose if he did remove from thence.¹⁸

Taverner's reluctance may have resulted from caution or diffidence, but more probably he was trying to drive a hard bargain. Longland's temporary solution was to recommend the choice of someone from Wolsey's own household chapel. He outlined what was required of the man appointed:

It shall be meet for him that your Grace will appoint ... to have both his breast at will [a good singing voice], the handling of an instrument, pleasure, cunning and exercise in teaching, and to be there four or five days before your appointed day [for officially opening the college], for the ordering of his children, to feel them, to know them, and to be acquainted with such songs as shall be the day of solemnity there sung.

Perhaps pressure was brought to bear on Taverner, or additional incentives caused him to change his mind. He must have been tempted by the prospect of working with twelve clerks and sixteen choristers, and was involved in recruiting singers from Boston by May 1526.¹⁹ He would have taken up residence in time for the official opening in October.²⁰ His annual salary was £10, but he received allowances for food and clothing that brought his total pay to more than £14, much more than a clerk at Tattershall received.²¹

Expectations of Taverner would have been high in an institution that seemed set to outshine all other colleges at Oxford and Cambridge. The Protestant martyrologist John Foxe, no admirer of Wolsey, praised the new institution:

This ambitious cardinal gathered together into that college whatsoever excellent thing there was in the whole realm ... Besides that, he also appointed unto that company all such men as were found to excel in any kind of learning and knowledge [including] Taverner of Boston, the good musician.²²

And on 2 April 1528 Thomas Cromwell was able to write to Wolsey that 'your chapel ... [is] most devoutly and virtuously ordered, and the ministers within the same not only diligent in the service of God, but also the service daily done within the same so devout, solemn, and full of harmony, that in mine opinion it hath few peers'.²³ This degree of diligence had not always existed, however. In February 1527 it had been necessary for the dean to ask for an additional statute to discourage absenteeism among 'the ministers of the

chapel [chaplains and clerks], for diverse of them are very negligent, and often absent, especially from Matins and the Mass of Requiem', and to introduce fines for those who missed services.²⁴ This may not imply slackness on Taverner's part, for his authority was over the boy choristers only.

The pattern of daily services and devotions²⁵ was broadly similar to that of Tattershall Collegiate Church, but even more extensive, with more singing. For although the Office of the Virgin was still said by the choristers, all parts of the daily Office, including Terce, Sext and None, were sung. The expressions 'cum nota' and 'cum cantu' ('with note' and 'with singing') imply the use of plainsong, whereas at the Lady Mass and for votive antiphons polyphony ('intorto cantu') was demanded. Particularly remarkable was the requirement for three votive antiphons after Vespers and Compline, one each to the Trinity, the Virgin and St William of York, and for a further three at seven o'clock in the evening.

The college statutes also demanded that the instructor, who must be a man very skilled in music, should teach his choristers the art of music as well as instruct them: in other words, both theoretical and practical guidance were expected. The following translation gives some indication of Taverner's duties:

The instructor of the choristers is not obliged to be present at the divine offices [services such as daily Matins and Vespers] on non-feast days, on feasts on which the choir is not ruled, and on other days when commemorations²⁶ are observed (which we require to be four, namely of the Trinity, of St Mary, of All Saints and of St Frideswide); but we require that at those times he diligently instructs and teaches his choristers music. On all remaining days and feasts however, the said instructor is obliged to be present with his choristers at all services from beginning to end (so many of the choristers as in the judgement of the dean seem to suffice for Matins, Mass, the procession and Vespers); unless, for a reason which must be approved by the dean, sub-dean or precentor, he happens to be absent. In this case we require that he provides at his own expense another who is willing and able to fill his place in the aforesaid [services].²⁷

The statutes indicate that one of the clerks was to be organist, but Taverner's work did include some organ playing. Anthony Dalaber recounted a visit to the college in 1528: 'Even-song [Vespers] was begun, and the Dean and the other Canons were there in their grey amices: they were almost at "Magnificat" before I came thither. I stode at the quier door and heard Master Taverner play, and others of the chapel there sing ...'.²⁸

Taverner's duties took him away from Oxford on at least one occasion. In late July 1528 Nicholas Townley, master of the works and controller of the college, wrote to one of Wolsey's servants Thomas Alford about recruitment for the choir of the cardinal's newly-founded college at Ipswich:

Master Taverner will be at Hampton Court himself on Saturday next [1 August] with His Grace and bring with him four children that be very good to that intent my Lord's Grace may hear them sing, and then to choose such two as shall stand with

His Grace's pleasure. Master Taverner will bring with him at the same time all those books of songs that Lentall did leave with Master Gouff.²⁹

Although no records of commissions or of payments survive, some of Taverner's music must have been composed at Cardinal College. In particular the votive antiphons *O Christe Jesu pastor bone*, *Ave Maria* and *Sancte Deus* were probably intended for the late afternoon and evening ceremonies there.³⁰

Early in 1528 Taverner became involved in events that must have left an enduring impression, and which provide us with a rare glimpse of him as a man. They mark his first known encounter with the religious and political uncertainties and difficulties that were to characterize the second half of Henry VIII's reign. The authorities discovered that Lutheran literature was circulating at Cardinal College, and accordingly a number of men were 'kept in ward ... being suspect to have books suspect of errors' as the dean, John Higdon, expressed it in a letter to one of Wolsey's chaplains. Taverner was involved, but Wolsey took a lenient view:

As for Master Taverner I have not commit him to prison, neither Radley [one of the clerks], because the register [registrar] of the university at his being with my lord's grace ... their names among other suspect sent up by the university, his grace said to him, as for Taverner and Radley, they be unlearned, and not to be regarded. As for Master Taverner, the hiding of Master Clark's books and being privy to the letter sent of Master Clark from Master Garrett after he was fled be the greatest things after my mind that can be laid to his charge.³¹

John Foxe's account agrees essentially with Higdon's: Taverner 'was accused and suspected for hiding Clark's books under the boards in his school, yet the cardinal, for his music, excused him, saying that he was but a musician: and so he escaped'.³² Nevertheless, according to Foxe, Taverner with several others had to walk in procession carrying a faggot, as a reminder that convicted heretics could be burned; as a sign of repentance, he was obliged to throw a book into a bonfire.

A marginal note states that 'this Taverner repented him very much that he had made songs to popish ditties, in the time of his blindness'.³³ The phrase 'in the time of his blindness' implies a subsequent seeing of the light through acceptance of Protestant beliefs, the expression 'popish ditties' probably signifying all texts associated with Catholic services and devotions.³⁴ The marginal note is easy to dismiss as the prejudice of a partisan writer, and subsequent events do not require us to believe either that Taverner converted to Lutheranism in 1528 or that he abandoned his work as a musician at this time. But there may be a substratum of truth. Foxe, like Taverner, knew both Boston and Oxford, and he may have encountered the composer or others who knew him. The comment may, for example, have originated from

something said in jest or as a result of temporary frustration. And while Taverner did continue as a musician after 1528 there is nothing to prove that he was musically active to the end of his life.

After Wolsey's fall from office in the autumn of 1529, the whole future of Cardinal College was in doubt, and the numbers of choristers and chaplains began to decrease.³⁵ Taverner continued in his post only until April 1530, when the accounts record a final payment of £5 for the first two terms of the college year 1529–30.³⁶ Almost certainly he returned immediately to his native Lincolnshire, and became involved in music at the parish church of St Botolph in Boston. He would have known that the post of instructor of the choristers had fallen vacant a year earlier,³⁷ and, although there is no record of this, it is likely that he took up the appointment. The move from an Oxford college to a Lincolnshire parish church appears at first sight disadvantageous, but in fact the musical arrangements at St Botolph's were exceptional. In the mid 1520s both the organist and the instructor of the choristers were paid higher salaries than Taverner's at Cardinal College.³⁸ Although both the town and the choir became less prosperous in the 1530s and 1540s, the antiquary John Leland was able to report in 1538 that

St Botolph's is ... for a parish church the best and fairest of all Lincolnshire, and served so with singing, and that of cunning men, as no parish is in all England. The society and brotherhood belonging to this church hath caused this, and now much land belongeth to this society.³⁹

The 'society and brotherhood' was the Guild of St Mary, a prosperous fraternity which maintained services at St Botolph's with, in 1525–26, a choral establishment of ten chaplains, ten clerks and a sizeable number of choristers.⁴⁰ No register of members exists, but it is hard to believe that Taverner did not belong to this guild. He is certainly mentioned in some of the accounts that survive from 1538–39, being identified as the former tenant of properties in Boston that belonged to the guild and were reserved for musicians,⁴¹ which may imply that he was no longer involved in music at St Botolph's.⁴² From 1537 Taverner belonged to the Guild of Corpus Christi, but although this fraternity played a part in maintaining services at St Botolph's it is not known to have employed singers of polyphony.

Taverner's withdrawal from music at St Botolph's in the latter half of the 1530s must have been linked to the declining fortunes of the Guild of St Mary and its consequent reduced support for music, which might even have resulted in the choir's reduction to a body of men only, so that a master of the choristers was no longer required. Leland referred only to 'cunning men', and did not mention boys at all, although he may have taken them for granted or considered them unworthy of mention. The guild had relied heavily on finances generated by the *Scala Coeli* indulgence, but these were cut off when,

after Henry VIII had broken with Rome, the indulgence was banned under the Ten Articles of 1536.⁴³

Taverner is not known to have sought further musical employment after leaving St Botolph's. The decline of the Guild of St Mary was probably decisive, but the anxieties that led to the Lincolnshire rebellion of October 1536, which included the suspicion that much church property was to be confiscated by the king, may have persisted sufficiently to convince him that there was no future in church music for him.

It is probable that Taverner's comfortable financial position in his last years was largely the result of marriage, although the date of that marriage is unknown. His wife Rose may have been the widow of John Copley *alias* Lyster, a former alderman of the Guild of St Mary who died in April 1538.⁴⁴ It is likely that she was the daughter of Thomas Parrowe,⁴⁵ who owned land in Boston and was prominent in the Guilds both of St Mary and of Corpus Christi. Rose had two daughters, Isabell and Emma, whereas the composer had no 'heirs of the body ... lawfully begotten' in August 1545, his brother William being his 'next heir'.⁴⁶ Her will, dated 1 May 1553, includes bequests to her 'two daughters' children'. One of these, although not named in the will, was George Salmon, son of Emma and Stephen Salmon. He was born in 1546 or 1547, so it is quite likely that Emma was born in the 1520s, and Rose in the first decade of the 1500s.⁴⁷ Rose appears to have been a formidable woman who was suspected of sharp practice more than once, for two legal actions were brought against her in the years immediately following John Taverner's death.⁴⁸

Taverner also saw the possibility of gain from striking up a relationship with Thomas Cromwell, Lord Privy Seal and the king's trusted deputy in ecclesiastical government. Cromwell (no relation of Ralph Cromwell) may already have encountered Taverner in 1528 when he visited Cardinal College. E.H. Fellowes wrongly assumed that the composer had converted to Lutheranism at Cardinal College, renounced his musical career as a result, and then actively persecuted those who adhered to the traditional faith. It is less likely that Taverner was Cromwell's 'agent'⁴⁹ than that he volunteered information, hoping for favours in return, largely on behalf of people for whom he was concerned.⁵⁰ He may have thought it wise to demonstrate his loyalty to the government so soon after the Lincolnshire rebellion: this had touched Boston slightly,⁵¹ and some doubts about him may have lingered ever since his arrest at Cardinal College in 1528.

The earliest of three letters to Cromwell was written at Boston on 11 September 1538 at a time when the government was taking action against what it saw as idolatrous practices. Taverner indicated that the order to dispose of the rood in Boston Parish Church had been carried out, but there is no indication that he took any active part in what happened. He may have been an eyewitness, but his account is too brief to make this certain. His

reference to the sermon is so short and general that even this could be secondhand:

According to your lordship's commandment, the rood was burned the 7 day of this month being also the market day, and [there was] a sermon of the black friar at the burning of him, who did express the cause of his burning and the idolatry committed by him, which sermon hath done much good and hath turned many men's hearts from it.⁵²

It has been possible to misinterpret this passage as meaning that the friar, not the rood, was burned, and that Taverner was a cruel and bigoted fanatic, because on two occasions out of three the rood is referred to as 'him' instead of 'it'. But unless the expression 'informed ... on' in the following quotation lacked its current implication and merely signified 'told about', Taverner was apparently prepared to act as one of the many informers on whom Tudor government depended. His servant had been sent in pursuit of an anonymous Scottish doctor, of whose supposed offence nothing is now known:

The Scot that I informed your lordship on that did dwell at Mountgrace,⁵³ I send my servant for him but he is gone abroad to exercise his practice in physic and surgery so that as yet I can have no knowledge where he is.

Taverner went on to remind Cromwell about the wardship of John Copley.

I beseech your good lordship to remember the wardship of John Copley for whom Master Nowell, deputy to Master Pallate [Paulet], master of the wards, at his last sitting here at Boston of finding offices the [?] of August last past would have compounded and agreed with his mother for 20 marks, and she to have had the wardship of him ... And the truth to certify your lordship, he hath no lands but in reversion and is of the age of twenty-one years ... I do not doubt but my lord of Suffolk at your desire will be content that I or his mother have him.

John Copley was the young man of that name mentioned in an inquisition post mortem of 1538⁵⁴ as the heir of John Copley *alias* Lyster, where he is said to be 'nineteen years and more', although in Taverner's letter of the same year he is 'of the age of twenty-one years'. Just before he died Copley *alias* Lyster had agreed to an arrangement whereby his widow Rose should have an interest in his estate for six years after his death, but should pay Copley junior £16 each year. When the six years had expired, the young man would come into full possession of the property (in fact he died, leaving a very young son, in 1542). In September 1538 John Copley junior would therefore have had, as Taverner put it, 'no lands but in reversion' – that is no lands until some time in the future. Taverner was presumably hoping to gain some control or financial advantage, but the exact nature of the desired settlement is at present unclear.

The second letter, from Boston on 20 January 1539, shows concern for the

plight of the Boston friars before their houses were dissolved, and indicates that Taverner was in a position to offer financial assistance. He conveyed no information that could be of value to Cromwell, but may have hoped to be rewarded for instructing the friars not to sell the lead with which their houses were roofed, or at least to be reimbursed for his expenses in relieving the friars' poverty:

The priors with their brethren of the friars Dominic[an]s, White and Austins [Augustinians] hath oft and divers times resorted unto me sore and piteously lamenting their great poverty, knowing no manner of ways how to provide livings for them and their poor brethren till such time as their houses be surrendered. For why? The devotion of people is clean gone. Their plate and other implements be sold and the money spent, so that in manner there is nothing left to make sale of now but only lead, which (if I had not given them contrary commandment) they would likewise have plucked down and sold to have relieved therewith them and their poor brethren. But in avoiding such spoil I bade them come to me in mean while at all times when they lacked anything and they should have it of me. Wherefore I humbly beseech your good lordship that they may know your pleasure and commandment by my servant what they shall do.⁵⁵

The suppression of the friaries went ahead shortly afterwards according to a letter written to Cromwell on 14 February 1539 by Richard Ingworth, the suffragan bishop of Dover. Ingworth had 'delivered the same houses ... with all the poor implements for his [the king's] money' to 'Master Taverner and Master Johnys', who were described as 'servants of the king's grace', probably a conventional expression rather than an indication of employment. Taverner's order that the friars did not strip their roofs of lead had been obeyed: the bishop reported that 'the houses be all meetly leaded'.⁵⁶ But perhaps the wood that Taverner later sold to the Guild of St Mary⁵⁷ came originally from one of the suppressed friaries.

On 2 May 1540 Taverner wrote a third letter to Cromwell on behalf of an elderly and infirm relative Charles Yerburgh, concerning the disputed ownership of some land in Yorkshire. Yerburgh was 'neither of power to pursue his remedy at the common law nor to contend long in suit before the ... Council [of the North]'.⁵⁸ Cromwell had previously given some assistance in the matter, and was asked to help further, being promised in the event of a successful outcome an annuity from the property involved. Cromwell was executed less than three months after the letter was written, however, and may never have acted on the matter.

During his last few years Taverner was a man of some wealth and influence who owned about thirty acres of arable land and pasture⁵⁹ with an annual value of over £4,⁶⁰ a holding which was, however, small by comparison with that of the Copley family. The original cost of Taverner's land may have been about £90,⁶¹ six times his annual income at Oxford. He ranked as 'generosus' ('gentleman'), a term that set him above a yeoman but

below an 'armiger' ('esquire') such as Nicholas Robertson, first mayor of Boston. He was able to lend £20 to Anthony Robertson and William Kydd,⁶² and he acted as coexecutor with John Tupholme for the estate of Roger Meres, which was valued at £133.⁶³ He and his wife each kept a servant.⁶⁴

Taverner joined the Boston Guild of Corpus Christi in 1537 – perhaps a politic move after the Guild of St Mary had suffered a major loss of income when the Scala Coeli indulgence was banned. He was elected one of the treasurers in 1541, and still held office in 1543, the year in which the guild's records end.⁶⁵ The borough of Boston was granted a charter of incorporation in Letters Patent of 14 May 1545. Taverner was named fifth in a list of twelve aldermen to hold office for life 'so that they behave themselves well in their office'.⁶⁶

The council minutes refer to the first day's business:

The first day of June in the 37 year of the reign of our sovereign lord Henry the VIIIth ... Nicholas Robartson esquire, mayor of this borough of Boston ... did take his corporal oath in the Guildhall of the said borough, in the presence of the recorder, the 12 aldermen and the inhabitants of the said borough.

The same day the 12 aldermen of the said borough that is to wit Nicholas Felde, John Tupholme, John Wendon, John Taverner, William Spynkes, William Kyd, Thomas Sorsbye, Harrye Foxe, William Bollys, John Margerye, William Ysott and Harry Hoode, by the authority of the said charter, did take their corporal oaths.⁶⁷

Taverner's only recorded duties as an alderman were, on that day and the next, to witness the oaths of other officials, including the recorder and town clerk. In the minutes there are changes in the order of the aldermen's names, with Taverner's appearing fourth. As the Letters Patent required 'four aldermen of the elder of the aldermen to be Justices of the Peace' Taverner may have been a candidate for that distinction either immediately or on an early vacancy. The mayoralty would undoubtedly have fallen to him in due course as it did to a number of his colleagues, had he lived longer.

But Taverner died five months later on 18 October. He was buried 'in the bell house'⁶⁸ of Boston Parish Church, where a modern floor plaque commemorates him in the words 'JOHN TAVERNER Musician died 1545'. He had been in poor health for some time, John Tupholme having noticed in August that he 'did greatly decay'.⁶⁹

Rose Taverner stated that John died intestate.⁷⁰ Intestacy was not uncommon, partly because there was some superstitious feeling about making a will before death was imminent. Taverner, knowing his state of health, may have been reluctant to confront the inevitable, or he may have intended to make a will but been prevented by sudden complete incapacity.

Wills were commonly concerned with small bequests and charitable donations rather than with the transmission of lands, which was often organized long before death through arrangements rather similar to the forms

of trust set up by modern landowners. Taverner had apparently done something of this latter kind. A legal proceeding termed an inquisition post mortem took place in October 1546 in respect of the 17 acres of land and 11 acres of pasture that he had owned in Skirbeck, near Boston.⁷¹ It was intended to establish what lands were held of the king, and what rights (for example, wardship) the king could exercise over the estate. From the report of the hearing we learn that on 8 August 1545 Taverner had transferred his 28 acres to Richard Goge and Richard Gilman, two lay clerks of St Botolph's. Two days later, Goge and Gilman handed over the land to the joint ownership of Taverner and his wife, for according to English law a man was not able to will property directly to his widow: if Taverner had died without issue and without making alternative provision, his brother William, as 'next heir', would have inherited his land. On John's death Rose duly inherited 'by right of survivorship'. The timing of the transaction confirms John Tupholme's observation of Taverner's failing health, which led on 9 August 1545, just one day after the land transfer described above, to the making of an agreement between Taverner and Tupholme to deal with the eventuality of the latter's being left sole executor of Roger Meres's will.

In May 1553, a few days before she died, Rose Taverner willed her land in Skirbeck and another property to her married daughters, Isabell Hodge and Emma Salmon. There were various other bequests, but no member of John's family was named, and nothing apart from land was referred to as having belonged to him – no musical instruments or manuscripts, for example. Rose Taverner wished to be 'buried in the parish church of Saint Botolph in the said Boston in the bell house next my husband'.

In conclusion, what kind of man was Taverner? Fellowes's references to 'the musician's sensitive temperament in a man of such strong character' and to Taverner's 'fanaticism'⁷² are based on a misreading of the evidence, and on the supposition that a sixteenth-century composer was an 'artist' in the Romantic sense. All that is recorded of his character is the testimony of Anthony Robertson, Rose's adversary in law, who described him as 'a very honest man' in whose 'word and promise' he had 'an especial trust and confidence'.⁷³ While this may have been coloured by a desire to compliment the deceased husband at the widow's expense, Robertson was Taverner's immediate predecessor as treasurer of the Guild of Corpus Christi.⁷⁴ Taverner's associations with Cromwell and Ingworth, and his selection as treasurer of the Guild of Corpus Christi and as alderman of Boston, do confirm however that he was regarded as capable and trustworthy once the brush with authority in 1528 was behind him, as he must have been earlier on when appointed to Cardinal College. He seems to have been alive to any opportunity for financial advantage and advancement.

Whatever his private convictions, Taverner always conformed outwardly