

St Asaph Choral Society – a reflection on and memories of sixty years

The St Asaph Cathedral Choral Society, as it was then known, was founded by Dr JR Middleton, then Organist and Master of the Choristers, at the request of a group of local singers whom he had gathered to sing The Messiah. From its inception, the choir relied on his goodwill, and he was tremendously supportive.

It is impossible in any reflection on those sixty years, not to acknowledge all the conductors, associate conductors and accompanists, to whom we as members owe so much, and also all those who served on committees, both choir members, fundraising non singing members, and all the other activities which kept and keep our society going. It is no mean feat to find ways of generating income to enable its running. None of our music making would be possible of course, without the support of our members who come week in and week out to practices.

Looking back on the handwritten minutes from 1970's and 80's, funding is a constant theme, and there were many activities organised to support it, including treasure hunts, car boot sales, coffee mornings and sponsorship of adverts in programmes etc, as well as grants and the occasional very generous donations.

Reading back through these minutes also shows how life has changed both socially and financially. The minutes are meticulously recorded in longhand and signed and dated, but essentially remain, I am sure, the structure of current committee meetings. I think our current treasurer would pale at the initial introduction of 20p subscription per week, later raised to 50p in 1987, all relative of course! When I first joined a bag was passed around for the money, only to be emptied at the end containing some coins, but also odd buttons. My suggestion about the need for weekly subscriptions was readily accepted, and then began the weekly ritual of Rosie Solbe recording attendance and myself recording the money. Thank goodness we can now pay annually!

Staging was always an issue, and lots of negotiations went on arranging and finally buying our own. Initially there was no rail at the top of it, and one of the basses fell off. Luckily he was unhurt, but the following committee minutes recorded the urgent need to acquire a back rail!

There is also a request from John Belcher to have a podium from which to conduct!

When Dr Middleton retired in 1970, he passed the baton to Graham Elliott, the then Organist and Master of the Choristers. Sadly he resigned in November 1978, citing 'the present membership' as 'quite inadequate' to perform choral works, and although I cannot find dates recording the exact membership at this time, I think it is safe to assume there were about 35 members with 4 basses and 4 tenors.

When Dr Middleton died in 1983, I remember the Choral Society being asked to perform his arrangement of the hymn 'Praise my soul, the King of Heaven' for his daughters.

Michael Lewis, a well - known musician from Rhyl Music Club accepted the offer to become conductor, and when I joined in 1978, we met, as we do today, in the then very cold Parish church. There was a well - established hierarchy of members, and it was a bit daunting. Heaven forbid anyone sat in their seat!

With Michael Lewis conducting, it was decided at the AGM in 1979, that we would be known as the St Asaph Choral Society, although our ties are inextricably interwoven with the Cathedral, where we continue to hold most of our concerts today.

In the 1980's we moved up to the Dean's library, which wasn't much warmer if I'm honest! Some of the men's practices took place in Fairholme School, when additional work was needed to learn new works.

At half time in those days we had coffee downstairs. Rosie remembers going down to boil the water and hearing the thump, thump on the ceiling of people beating time with their feet.

During this time, Fay Adamson, then Lucia Brammer were our accompanists.

Over the years, our musical accompaniment has been provided by The North Wales Sinfonia, followed by the North Wales Philharmonia, professional organists and pianists, and we have been extremely lucky to have such talented musicians, amongst them world famous harpist Eleanor Bennett in the orchestra for one of our concerts.

In 1982, Michael Lewis proposed that John Belcher Organist and Master of the Choristers at the Cathedral, and Jefferson Thomas, Director of

Music at Lowther College should be appointed as Associate Conductors, which was unanimously accepted at the next AGM.

We sang at several venues including, what was then Lowther College (Bodelwyddan Castle), - a memory of Rita and myself of the double bass player collapsing, from excess alcohol, during the concert, the concert continuing, then being stopped, his being carried off, and the concert resuming! We also sang at Rhyl Music Club, and other churches in the area. We had augmentation from the Liverpool Choral Union when necessary.

Special memories of music from this time included a performance of Elijah, with Donnie Ray Albert, with John Belcher conducting, The Dream of Gerontius with Kenneth Bowen singing tenor and Verdi's Requiem with American opera singer Jo Ann Pickens. Some of us used to go down to the pub after concerts and she came with us. It was amazing to hear the whole pub silent on a Saturday night, whilst she sung unaccompanied spirituals.

We have been lucky through the connections of all our conductors, to have had soloists, both local and further afield, a practice which continues today.

Our Presidents during this time were The Dean, Raymond Renowden, and then Bishop Alwyn Rice Jones.

I well remember, after a Choral Society dinner, Fay interviewing Dean Renowden in a Desert Island Disc type format. His war time experiences of going into Japan were fascinating to listen to.

The Choral Society celebrated its 21st, 25th and 30th anniversaries, in several venues including the Kinmel Manor Hotel.

With the retirement of Michael Lewis in July 1986 and John Belcher's move to take up an appointment in Tewkesbury Abbey, the Associate conductor Hugh Davies, Organist and Master of the Choristers, was appointed Conductor in 1986. Fay Adamson was appointed accompanist, with additional help from Norman Rimmer.

There also followed a period of collaboration at times, with boys from the Cathedral choir and Howell's School Chapel Choir. The latter became involved as Peter Downey, Assistant Organist at the Cathedral, was also head of the music at Howell's School. To sing in Britten's 'St Nicholas'

and hear the three choirboys singing, walking slowly down the Nave in the Cathedral, was magical and very effective.

With Hugh, the Choral Society not only sang standard works, but also Thomas Tallis' Forty part motet 'Spem in Alium Nunquam Habui', 'The Rio Grande' by Constant Lambert, and 'Hiawatha's Wedding Feast' by Samuel Coleridge Taylor.

The Choral Society regularly gave carol concerts, as well as choral works. A memory of one of these was singing 'The Twelve Days of Christmas' faster and faster and faster!

The hard work of fundraising continued all the while. Covenanting added to funds, monthly raffles were held, there were coffee mornings, coffee evenings, sponsored walks, sales of the famous knitted jerseys (courtesy of Mrs Anne Parry), and commission from Webb Ivory catalogues, as well as numerous other efforts.

Sponsorship from various local businesses, came in the form of half or full page adverts to fund our programmes.

Official support came in the form of grants from The North Wales Arts Association, The Welsh Amateur Music Federation, The National Federation of Music Societies, and The Musician's Union.

The timing of concerts took some organisation in order not to clash with other choral groups in the area.

Music had to be hired, and, if other groups in other areas were singing similar works, our librarians had to search nationwide in order to find enough copies. This also meant that any pencil marks written in had to be erased before collection at the end of concerts, and any missing music had to be paid for. It was hard work, and our librarians are owed much gratitude. This ceased post Covid.

With Hugh's departure, Norman Rimmer took over, and there was more collaboration with Colwyn Choral Society over many years.

In May 1999, the Choral Society welcomed the appointment of Paul Harvey. He was an accomplished classical pianist, recitalist and composer. As a conductor, he had been fortunate to have been selected for a week's master class with Sir Adrian Boult. He had conducted most of the standard orchestral and choral repertoire.

He had a particular love for theatre and had directed many musicals, including Sondheim's Sweeney Todd with a full West End orchestra.

He chose some lighter and varied works, both vocal and instrumental as well as the usual choral works. On 27th March 2004, he conducted a concert, celebrating 40th anniversary of the choral society.

Marking 50th anniversary of the coronation of the late Queen Elizabeth, it is notable to see our next conductor, Graham Eccles, playing several organ works by Handel.

It was therefore quite natural that Graham Eccles was appointed conductor in 2007, having been previously Organist and Master of the Choristers at the Cathedral from 1998 until 2003, then Director of Music at Bangor Cathedral, and now a freelance musician. He was also conductor of Colwyn Bay Choral Society, as well as having teaching and many other musical commitments.

Our accompanist during these earlier years was Tim Stuart, now the accompanist of Mold Choral Society, who still plays for us on occasion today.

In 2013?, the choir moved its practices to MC Capel Trefnant, as The Dean's Library became a commercial location. This was warm, comfortable and had good facilities!

We sang an extensive number and variety of works, including Acis and Galatea by Handel, Songs of the Fleet by Stanford, Gentle Earth of Wales by Patrick Larley. Sometimes we found these works quite challenging, but we benefitted from Graham's patient and persistent efforts to teach us about the theory of music as amateur singers – very calmly and quietly. We nonetheless always had fun and enjoyed our practices.

Our accompanist during these more recent years was John Hosking, who having been Assistant Director of music at St Asaph Cathedral, latterly freelance and now Organist at Blackburn Cathedral. He also composed several choral works, which we have sung in including his Requiem, O Magnum Mysterium, Te Deum and The Seven Trumpets. These gave us plenty of challenges, but somehow we succeeded!

Again we also sang at other venues, including St Mary's Church in Denbigh, and Christ Church United Church in Rhyl.

Our last concert before the pandemic was Haydn's Nelson Mass, and Handel's Chandos Anthem No.9

Life without singing was a bit of a desert, and it was a real relief when the green light was given for singing to resume. A post Covid coffee morning was held in the Parish church in July 2022 to welcome previous and interested prospective members.

Trystan Lewis took over the baton, agreeing to become our current musical director. He of course, has vast experience of choral conducting, including Mold Choral Society, Cor Cymysg Dyffryn Conwy, and The Tremeirchion Bach Choir, as well as many others. He brings enthusiasm and drive to our practices, together with the odd amusing anecdote from his musical career, which keeps us cheerful, especially in the more difficult parts of a work! His links mean that occasionally we can be augmented from other choral societies.

Graham, so fortunately for us, agreed to remain as our accompanist, as post Covid, he had many other commitments across North Wales and beyond. It is good to be able to maintain that link and continuity.

In the first post Covid committee meeting in May 2022, it was thought best to resume choral singing with a Come and Sing event, given that most people hadn't sung for at least two years.

Unfortunately Colwyn Choral Society were unable to reform, so additional members were recruited from there.

When the Choral Society resumed practices in September, the chapel in Trefnant already had regular bookings for Monday evenings, so we were able to return to St Asaph Parish Church, with much improved facilities since its reordering.

Enhanced rehearsal tracks were made available for each voice part in preparation for practices accessed on the website, instead of the CD's we originally used. This is invaluable, and involves an enormous amount of work.

It was also agreed that music should now be bought individually.

The next planned work was a joint performance of The Sea Symphony by Ralph Vaughan Williams with Cor Cymysg Dyffryn Conwy and Mold Choral Society in May 2023. It required a huge amount of organisation with joint practices and fund raising, including a Come and Sing, raffles etc, including the sale of corsages, for the ladies.

It was very successful and thrilling to sing. It was just a marvellous experience for both the audience and choirs.

The previous need for the ladies to wear the coloured blouses, which always caused problems with continuity of materials, shades etc, was discontinued. Now the ladies wear black blouses and skirts or trousers, and the men dinner jackets and black bow ties.

A WhatsApp group was set up for members who wished to use it, and has proved invaluable for notifying changes of time, venues and reminders. As well as the website there is also a Facebook page.

In June 2022, the decision was taken that subscriptions would be paid annually by card or bankers order, although extenuating circumstances would be considered individually.

The immense hard work of the committee continues. There are job descriptions for its members, and much time and effort goes into planning for concerts, including the production of tickets, posters and programmes.

Funding remains as it always has been, a huge challenge. There are fewer grants available and concerts have to be planned with this in mind.

Overall, membership of the Society is increasing and the average age decreasing, a very good indication, hopefully, that the singing will continue for many years yet.

In writing this article, I am sure that I will have omitted some events, but I hope this is a fairly accurate summary, and it has been a privilege to research and record this with oversight from Rosie Solbe and Rita Thomas.

As I said at the beginning, our history as a Society is inextricably linked with the Cathedral, and we are, I think, very lucky to be able to sing in such wonderful surroundings. The current Dean, The Very Reverend Nigel Williams is our current President. I really hope that this link continues, since it has been, and is, the site of some memorable concerts we have given.

So here we are back in the same location we started in when I joined. When I look back on all those years, I am personally deeply struck by the fact that in this small city, we have had such wonderful musicians continuously over sixty years, who have given so much, encouraged and enabled us to have the experience of singing such wonderful choral

music with many talented players, and soloists. The sheer joy of singing is such that even now, I, and others I know, have to wind down before going to bed on a Monday night! The very best feeling, so thank you, and long may we continue...

Anne Dennis, Rosie Solbé and Rita Thomas