

THE HARMONIUM SINGERS 1971-2021

1. The early years

by Nicola Judd (founder member)

On 9 December 1971 a group of singers met at a house in Chestnut Avenue, Andover, to rehearse Christmas carols. The group had been brought together by Laurie Noble, chief clerk at Prefomed Line Products and choir man at St Mary's Parish Church. It consisted of work colleagues, other choir members, friends and family. Len Piper, husband of one of Laurie's colleagues, was the accompanist.

From 18 to 24 December this choir sang carols over five nights in the streets of the town and at children's homes, Eastfield House Home for the Blind, Andover War Memorial Hospital, the White Hart, the Star & Garter and the Conservative Club. Apart from the Conservative Club, where the choir was backed by The Melody Makers, the accompaniment was provided by Len with his portable 100-year-old harmonium. The choir's purpose was to raise money for Andover Children in Need – a fund the choir set up which was administered by Harry Croydon and Andover Social services.

This pattern was repeated over the next few years, adding visits to Little Bullington Nursing Home, St John's Hospital, the Wolversdene Club, Cherry Orchard Residential Home, Winton House Nursing Home at Nether Wallop and Charles Dalton Court. The choir did not have a name to begin with, but in December 1973 it was decided to adopt 'The Harmoniums' as a working title.

Food and drink were an important element of the social side of the choir. After every carol singing evening refreshments were available in one of the members' homes. There was a party after Christmas and a barbecue in late spring or summer. Mulled wine, mince pies or sausage rolls were on offer during the course of a street singing evening and often there was food at the different indoor venues, Charles Dalton Court being particularly generous. The Christmas cake at Little Bullington was always anticipated eagerly.

By this time Bruce Randall had arrived in Andover, working for Link Electronics. His background in this field was to prove useful but he was also an organist and singer. He was soon roped in when meeting his future wife Penny (another early member) and Bruce was destined to play a major role within a few years.

In 1975 the choir began to be a little more ambitious and started to put on concerts in addition to the street singing and visits. The first was at Picket Piece Village Hall on 16 December. On this occasion the electronic keyboard broke down and the harmonium had to be sent for.

The next concert was for Upper Clatford WI in the King Edward VII Memorial Hall on 14 December 1977. Earlier that year we had sung at Penny and Bruce's wedding in the February.

On 3 December 1978 the choir made its first recording, at the Link Electronics workshop on Anton Industrial Estate, thanks to Bruce. That year there were two carol concerts as well as five nights of street singing. Bruce was to record many performances by the choir and now has an archive covering over 40 years!

In 1980 the choir branched out again. For the first time, practices began in July because the choir was now preparing a programme of anthems, madrigals, part songs and folk songs to sing at Upper Clatford Methodist Chapel on 15 September, Anna Valley Mission Hall on 22 September and Ampport Methodist Chapel on 8 November. This appears to be the year when Bruce began conducting the choir, starting on 7 December as Laurie Noble was soon to move to Devon where he later joined Choir 86 with whom we sang anniversary concerts. It was also at this time that the choir became known as The Harmonium Singers.

Ever more ambitious, excerpts from Handel's *Messiah* began to appear in the choir's programmes. Dr Tim James also took a share in conducting and continued to lead a small group entertaining residents in care homes and at small charity events right up to the present time.

From May 1983 the choir began having weekly practices throughout the year, not just in the lead-up to concerts and Christmas. We also started using Winton School as a practice venue, courtesy of member Paul Baird who taught music there, and who sang and sometimes conducted between 1983 and 1989. Prior to that we had met in members' homes, notably that of Luke and Sarah March, or at St Peter's church in Goodworth Clatford. In recent years we have rehearsed in St Alphege Chapel at St Mary's Church Centre, Andover. For much of that time our accompanist (and alto) was Gwen Goddard whose sympathetic and accurate playing was much admired.

On St George's Day 1985, the choir sang in a joint concert with Test Valley Brass and the Andover Recorder Ensemble, conducted by Paul Baird. Three months later we shared a programme with the Andover Area Schools' Chamber Orchestra and were conducted by Tim. As we began to initiate our own programmes, so our inclusion of appropriate readings began to develop. This became a hallmark of our performances, with words carefully selected by various members, notably Rosie Davis and Gerry McCaulder. Members took turns to serve on the committee including the role of Co-ordinator, which the late Penny Wood discharged with such distinction over a period of 13 years.

Our initial charity, Andover Children in Need, was closed as there was no call on the funds. We then began to support a variety of charities, usually local. And so the next chapter in the choir's development was under way.

2. The later years

by Bruce Randall

Christmas 1985 saw our first appearance at St Mary's Parish Church in Andover, a magnificent venue which until now had seemed too daunting. The glorious acoustic and organ proved very rewarding and the choir has performed at least one concert there most years ever since.

Emboldened by another successful Christmas concert at St Mary's in 1986, the choir accepted the first of several invitations from the Andover Festival to sing for the first time with an orchestra. A chamber choir, by its very nature, tends to perform smaller-scale works such as church anthems and motets, madrigals, part songs and choral arrangements of folk songs. So it was with great excitement that in June 1988 we performed the Handel *Coronation Anthems* accompanied by Le Corde Orchestra with added trumpets and drums. This was undoubtedly a turning point and began a new and more ambitious chapter in the development of the choir. The following year it was the Fauré *Requiem*, again with Le Corde.

1990 saw a step forward in presentation and branding with the adoption of a graphical logo of the choir's name, which has remained unchanged to the present day. In 1991 we performed for the first time the *Requiem* by John Rutter in the chamber version with instrumental ensemble, and in 1993 we appeared at the Festival with the virtuoso organist Carlo Curley. Later that year it was the Charpentier *Messe de Minuit* with the string quartet, a chamber organ and woodwind. This began an association with the Grainger String Quartet and ad-hoc ensembles of semi-pro players which saw performances of further larger-scale works such as *Mass in G* (Schubert), *Missa Brevis Sancti Joannis de Deo* (Haydn), *Magnificat* (Durante) and *Gloria* (Vivaldi).

In May 1992 the choir made the first of two visits to Redon, Andover's twin town in Brittany. It was a great pleasure to sing the Vivaldi *Gloria* in the large abbey church, along with other sacred items, as well as at the Sunday mass the next morning. In a return visit six years later we sang in the adjacent Chapelle du Lycee Saint-Sauveur, presenting a potpourri of anthems, madrigals and part songs. On both visits we were hosted magnificently, all the more smoothly with the liaison skills of bass Ron Jennings and alto Joanna Baird (both French teachers).

In 1994, Andover celebrated the 1000-year anniversary of the conversion of the Viking king Olaf to Christianity at St Mary's. We gave an ambitious concert of choral music from all 10 centuries, ranging from plainsong to Mathias, with professional presenters. In 1996, for the choir's 25th anniversary we teamed up with Laurie Noble's Devon choir for the Rutter *Requiem* in Abbotsbury – with a return match in Andover for Part 1 of Handel's *Messiah*.

Apart from Redon and Devon, the choir has by no means been limited to performing locally. Concerts have been given in Wiltshire, Dorset, Leicestershire, Oxfordshire, and the Isle of Wight. Particular highlights include Winchester Cathedral (with a military band!), Holy Trinity in Winchester, St Boniface Chandler's Ford, Bournemouth Oratory (Sacred Heart basilica) and St George's (Oakdale) in Poole.

As a new millennium dawned, we took the opportunity to mark it with a series of three concerts covering the church's liturgical year. This began in Advent 1999, followed by Lent to Trinity in April 2000 (featuring Allegri's *Miserere*, Schubert's *Stabat Mater* and Lotti's *Crucifixus*). The third concert was devoted to Christmas and included the premiere of a new carol by Phillip Pennington Harris (see later paragraph) together with the Rutter *Te Deum* and carols accompanied by a brass ensemble and percussion – it was a magnificent and joyful sound!

Further collaborations with professional and semi-professional musicians allowed us to develop concerts with ever more ambitious works. The concert pianist and broadcaster David Owen Norris played the organ in 2002 (when he was director of music at St Mary's) alongside the Fingle String Quartet. Other skilled organists have included John March, John Wright, Ian Crabbe, Hugh Benham, Carlo Curley, Hubert Dawkes, Paul Inwood, Phillip Harris, Douglas Paine, Ben Davis, (both Cambridge organ scholars), Peter Gilks, Marcus Reeves, Philip White-Jones, Timothy Rogerson and Robert Fielding.

Vocal soloists have most often been drawn from the choir, but guest singers have included Julian Poppleton, Carol Geddes, Evelyn Owen and Oliver Glynn. Notable contributions in words have been made by Gabriel Woolf, Jon Pertwee, Tony Birch, Sue Burnett, John Scicluna and Bruce Parker.

In 2009 and 2015 we brought the London-based period orchestra Linden Baroque to Andover. The *Coronation Anthems* had another outing, and also Purcell's *Come Ye Sons of Art* – at baroque pitch and with historically-informed performance practice, a challenging new experience!

The centenary of World War 1 provided the impetus to mark both the start and the conclusion of the war with different perspectives: in 2014 we contrasted words about the harsh reality of war with music of peace and consolation

including the Fauré *Requiem* with orchestra (raising £1500 for military charities). In 2018 we focused on composers whose lives were impacted by the war and then sang the modern-day requiem by John Rutter, with instrumental ensemble.

In 2017 instrumental accompaniment of a different and unusual kind presented itself in the form of two pianos. Peter Gilks and Gwilym Stacey, both accomplished organists, had been giving concerts locally of piano duets on two instruments as opposed to four hands on a single piano. Together we gave a joint concert to mark the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation, when we performed two substantial extracts from the Brahms *Requiem* plus other works with Lutheran connections. The following year the same team met again to provide lighter fare at the church in Ampport to raise money for the heating system.

It has been a delight to sing at numerous weddings, including those of members and their offspring. Sadly, we have also sung at funerals. Providing support to fellow singers at significant or difficult times has always been a part of being in the Harms 'family'. To our knowledge nine members of the choir have died over the years, all of them greatly missed and much appreciated for their part in this history – Stan Balam, Pat Bevan, Peter Stewart, Rosie Davis, Ed Elgar, Clive Judd, Hilary Oram, Penny Wood and Geraldine McCaulder. May they all be singing in a choir of angels.

The commissioning of new music has featured from time to time. Three Christmas carol settings were dedicated to us by notable local composers: *O Little Town of Bethlehem* and *A Hampshire Wassail* from Hubert Dawkes and *At the Manger (Mary's Song)* from Phillip Pennington Harris. We are now fortunate to have Andrew Wyndham as conductor, accompanist, singer and composer/arranger. Andrew brings a fresh approach, new repertoire and new music as the group is re-established following the Coronavirus pandemic of 2020-21.

After 40 years of leading the choir I am now more than happy to pass the baton into Andrew's extremely capable hands while enjoying more singing and playing myself. I also think it's right to draw a line under the Harmonium Singers 'brand' and begin this new phase with a descriptive new name – Andover Chamber Choir. May it flourish in the years ahead!

It has been a long and rewarding journey to reach 50 years, from the days of a portable harmonium to full orchestral accompaniment and everything in between! It has been a privilege to lead such a wonderful group of people in song over these many years, a privilege which I have never taken for granted. The next chapter of this story is well and truly underway.