

WELLS CATHEDRAL VOLUNTARY CHOIR

President Lady Gass, DCVO

A History of the Choir

Wells Cathedral Voluntary Choir was formed by Fridrik Walker, a Vicar Choral, at the end of 1986 to provide a choir for Midnight Eucharist on Christmas Eve. There were initially twenty six singers. The choir was subsequently asked to sing the special services held at Epiphany, on Ash Wednesday and Ascension Day. As the professional cathedral choir undertook more concerts and foreign tours, the Voluntary Choir was asked to sing over the week-ends of half term, the beginning and end of school holidays, the run up to Christmas and Low Sunday. In the last few years the choir has been singing an average of fifty services in the cathedral each year. The choir, or a smaller chamber group, also sings by arrangement for weddings, funerals, special services and occasional concerts in the cathedral and elsewhere.

In 1988 the directorship was taken over by Roger Wakeling who had just joined the Vicars Choral, having been director of music at St. Audries School. When Roger was forced to give up through ill health at the end of 1991, Katie Varcoe, the organ scholar, stepped in, and the choir enjoyed having its first lady at the helm until her time at Wells ended in July 1992. John Brooks from New York, a Vicar Choral, was then director for the 1992-93 academic years before moving on to become a lay clerk at Gloucester Cathedral.

Having a director from among the mostly transient Cathedral Music Department had drawbacks for the choir, so it was pleased when Dudley Holroyd agreed to take on the directorship in September 1993 for a minimum three-year contract. Formerly organist and master of the choristers of Bath Abbey, a professional music lecturer and Association Board examiner with considerable conducting skills, Dudley was also well known to the Voluntary Choir, having been its regular organist from the outset. Under his direction, the choir developed considerably.

When Dudley Holroyd died from cancer on Easter Monday 1998, the choir's deputy director, Michael Cockerham (MA (Cantab), ARCO, ARCM, LRAM), Director of Music at The Royal High School, Bath, took over as Director and Chairman. The choir is fortunate in having had the services of several talented organists, its current principal organist being Matthew Redman (BA, B Eng, FRCO).

Following a survey by the choir into how other cathedrals coped when their own choir was unavailable, the Association of Cathedral Voluntary Choirs was founded in Wells in 1997. Cathedral Voluntary Choirs from Derby, Exeter, Guildford, Peterborough, Truro, Worcester and Wells (170 singers) took part in the inaugural evensong and concert on 26 April 1997. Since then there have been regular meetings of the Association every eighteen months: at Guildford in Autumn 1998, Chester in Spring 2000, Worcester in Autumn 2001, Exeter in Spring 2003, Rochester in Autumn 2004, Peterborough in Spring 2006, Derby in Autumn 2007, Chelmsford in May 2009, Worcester in October 2010, Ely in May 2012, Derby in 2014 and then Lichfield in 2015. In 2016 Wells will again host the event to mark the 20th Anniversary.

In August 1998 Wells Cathedral Voluntary Choir went to Hereford to undertake its first week in residence at another cathedral. This was a great success and members particularly enjoyed the long daily rehearsals which allowed for greater attention to detail, the opportunity to get to know each other and time to discover common interests apart from singing. The choir is drawn from a wide area (throughout the Diocese and into Dorset, Wiltshire and Bristol), and not everyone is able to linger at *The Fountain* or *The Crown* after Thursday rehearsals for a drink and a chat. Being together for a week strengthened the fellowship of the choir and it was decided to repeat the exercise at other cathedrals. In August 1999 the choir was in residence at Chichester, in 2000 at

Ripon and in 2001 at St. David's in Pembrokeshire. In April 2002 the choir visited Bad Durkheim, Wells' Twin Town in the Palatinate, where it gave a concert and sang the Sunday service in the Schlosskirche. The choir also gave a concert in Kaiserslautern Stiftskirche. In the summer of 2003 the choir was in residence for a week at Lincoln Cathedral, in 2004 at Ely, in 2005 at Winchester, in 2006 at Canterbury, in 2007 at Truro, in 2008 at York Minster, in 2009 at Norwich Cathedral, in 2010 at Worcester, in 2011 at Salisbury, in 2012 at Durham, in 2013 at Exeter, in 2014 at St Albans and in 2015 at Edinburgh. We have booked visits to Llandaff in 2016 and Gloucester in 2017!

The choir celebrated the millennium in an "anno domini" way by singing all the psalms on Saturday 28th April 2001. They were joined in this venture by the Voluntary Choir from Salisbury Cathedral and the choir of St. Mary, Bathwick, Bath. Starting at 8.30 am, with a break for Evensong, Psalm 150 was completed just after 9 pm.

On 2nd June 2003 the choir organized a re-enactment of the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in Wells Cathedral. The children of Year Five at Wells Central Junior School took the parts of the dignitaries using the original words of the service in Westminster Abbey. The commentary, as given for those watching the BBC broadcast in 1953 was delivered by Canon Bowman-Eadie. The service was attended by the Vice Lord Lieutenant for Somerset, Admiral of the Fleet Sir Benjamin Bathurst, the Mayor of Wells and many leading Councillors from throughout the county. Members of the public and local schoolchildren helped fill the cathedral, with many of them dressing up to represent an original guest.

On Christmas Eve 2006 the choir celebrated its 20th Anniversary. On 17 June 2006 a Festal Evensong was held in the Cathedral, at which the choir was joined in singing the service by several past members. This was followed by a Celebratory Dinner in the Town Hall, which many past members, spouses, partners and special friends attended. On 30 September the Voluntary Choir was invited by Matthew Owens, Organist and Master of the Choristers, to sing a Joint Evensong with the Choristers and Vicars Choral of the Cathedral (a service which has since become an annual event).

In 2007, therefore, the Choir turned twenty-one! It proved to be a busy year for all singers. On 12 May we were invited by Graham Darke to take part in a Charity Concert in St Cuthbert's Church in aid of Marie Curie Cancer Trust. The main event of the year, however, was the 21st Anniversary Concert, held on Saturday 14 July in the Cathedral. For this concert the choir was joined by Lorien Ensemble; Matthew Redman on organ; Andrew Stephen and Alan Andrews on trumpet; Amy Lyddon and Kate Smith, sopranos; Ciaran O'Keefe, tenor; Stephen Foulkes, baritone. Michael Cockerham conducted and also sang counter-tenor. The first half of the concert comprised various anthems by Bocanegra, Bruckner, Gabrieli, and Pärt, and after the interval the choir sang Handel's "Dixit Dominus" - a new and challenging experience for most of us. The concert was in aid of the Cathedral Development Project, and the choir was able to give the Trust a little over £3,400 as a result.

Now that the choir has "come of age", we continue to sing over forty services in the Cathedral each year, comprising Evensongs and Sunday services, as well as "specials" when they fall in school holidays such as the Ash Wednesday Eucharist, Requiem Mass on All Souls' Day and, of course, the Open Door Service at the beginning of the visitor season each Spring. We are also often invited to sing at funerals and weddings, both in the Cathedral and elsewhere in the area.

Membership of the choir is by audition and dependant upon vacancies. There are currently just under thirty members divided between Decani and Cantoris. A reasonable standard of sight-reading is necessary in order to learn the choir's relatively wide repertoire of church music, both ancient and modern. Special delight has always been taken in the singing of the psalms. Rehearsals are held from 7.30 pm to 9.00 pm on Thursday evenings throughout the year.