

A History of Wantage Choral Society

1948 - 2012

This is the history of the Society over the past 64 years and with the help of both old and new members, will attempt to put as many details of the happenings of the choir over this time. To do this, many past and present members have been asked to give their personal views on what has happened during their time with the choir.

The Beginnings!

The Society was formed in **1948** as the Wantage Madrigal Singers under the inspiration of Father Ian Burton and Father F.J. Nash. Its first public performances were of Stainer's Crucifixion in April **1949** and an Evensong in Tewkesbury Abbey in July 1949, by which time the organisation had transformed into the Wantage Choral Society.

By **1961** the Choral Society was meeting in King Alfred's original School Hall under the direction of the **Rev. Eric King**, the Headmaster of King Alfred's School. At this time there were 40-50 members - mainly women!

The conductor met with the conductor of another local choir, Mr George Glew at the North Berks Festival. He was running the Wantage Radiation Laboratory choir, which was at Grove Airfield. Many of the Wantage Radiation men joined the Choral Society which meant that their performance of Handel's 'Judas Maccabeus' was a resounding success!

In **1962** the choir performed Verdi's 'Requiem' and Eric King conducted them for the last time. It had been his ambition to conduct the 'Requiem' and now that the choir was so much larger he was able to do this before retiring.

John Davies then took over the choir. He was head of music at St. Birinus School, Didcot and conducted them from **1963 to 1966**. Whilst there, this conductor was a young Welshman was very enthusiastic and built the choir to 102 members. His greatest achievement was when the choir entered the National Eisteddfod and they won 3rd prize for large mixed choirs. This carried a prize of £100. With this money they engaged Richard Rees - a tenor soloist - for a splendid 'Messiah' in December 1963.

The Cash!

All Choral Societies need at times to worry about money. The Minutes of the 1956 AGM reported: "The financial position of the Society however was good, there being about £20 in hand" (the current Treasurer shuddered on reading this). By 1959 the balance was £35; by the end of 1960 the accounts (audited by an ex-Naval Paymaster) showed only £13, 2s. 9d. – possibly because the minimum subscription was just 5s. (25p). By the 1969 AGM the Society was £5 in the red, was without a Conductor and Chairman, and had suffered the departure of several members: the Treasurer suggested that disbanding be considered. However the call for advances on subscriptions, and the filling of vital Officer and Committee posts, ensured that the Society could continue.

The Continuation!

A succession of conductors followed John Davies until **John Durrant**, Head of music at St. Mary's School took over from **1970-76**. He started the performing of Bach's 'Passions' each Easter, and later became President when **Andrew Pratten** replaced him as head of music and the choir conductor. During their time with the choir they always engaged outstanding young soloists from the Royal College of Music where they both still had connections.

Throughout the seventies the Choral Society was closely associated with St Mary's School. Not only did we use the school's Hall for all our practices and many of our concerts, but the school provided two of the Society's Musical Directors. At the beginning of the decade John Durrant, a skilled pianist, experienced chorus trainer and Head of Music at St Mary's held the post. The choir had achieved a measure of stability in numbers which allowed for performances of all but the largest pieces in the choral repertoire.

John Durrant handed the baton on to his much younger colleague, Andrew Pratten, although John and his wife Dawn Holder continued to take part in concerts as piano soloists. Throughout this period there was no association with any particular orchestra. Scratch orchestras would be assembled for performances in Wantage from local and particularly Oxford-based players, whilst for the joint concerts with Abingdon and District Music Society (ADMS) their own orchestra would be used.

Wantage Choral Society continued to enter the North Berks Music Festival which at that time was the regular local annual competitive event, locking horns with ADMS on a number of occasions. Just before Christmas we also appeared regularly at what at the beginning of the seventies was called the Chairman's Carol Concert. After the major revision of local government bodies and boundaries which took us from North Berkshire into Oxfordshire and reduced the status of the Wantage Urban Council to a Town Council civic pride was mollified by elevating the Chairman's title, so it became the Town Mayor's Carol Concert. The event had grown into something of a monster as each performing group, including several church choirs, were allowed to present two pieces each. It lasted hours and the Choral Society, who rounded off the evening with the final item, would be singing to an audience with a large number of the younger children fast asleep. On one occasion we took pity on the audience and gave what was probably the fastest rendering of "For unto us a son is born" in history!

The next conductor was **Terence Carter** who conducted the choir from **1983-2003**. As before the choir sang with both Abingdon and Didcot on occasions and also with Faringdon Singers as Terence Carter was also their conductor. During the time that Terence Carter was with the choir, the Wantage Silver Band joined with the choir for concerts such as Christmas Carols.

There were a series of temporary conductors from 2003 until **Richard Smith** joined the choir as their permanent conductor in **2005**. Since then the choir has increased to around 80 members again, and still grows. The choir now meets in Wantage Church of England School Hall, on a Tuesday evening in term time.

Members Old and New Wrote the Following.....

'I sang with Wantage Choral Society for 30 years. I joined because I had always loved singing and amongst other choirs had sung with the local church choir.'

'I sang with many of the conductors from the time of Andrew Pratten. Tuesday evening was choir practice and when I joined we met in St. Mary's School Hall and later the new Music Block.'

'The choir was such a friendly place to meet people and learn fine music, both old and some very modern and lighter pieces. Singing in a choir has so much to offer whatever the age and ability as there is usually someone on hand to offer advice.'

'We had some lovely concerts in Lains Barn in the summer singing such things as 'Gilbert and Sullivan' and 'Noah and His Floating Zoo'!'

Many members said that they joined through someone else asking them to 'come along with them'. This means that you don't feel alone when you walk in! The great thing for many is that there is no audition and you can feel comfortable about how you sing.

As one person wrote and many others have said, 'just to have one night out away from the family means a great deal to do something different.' Another comment was that the choir 'had such a good sound and the conductor a good sense of humour' - something much needed when keeping so many people happy.

Another member joined because of the 'Training Choir' notice. As she had no previous musical training she decided to 'give it a go' and is still singing with the choir.

Another member wrote that 'it is only worth doing something if you do it well which seems to be the whole reason for singing with a choir and taking part. You get enormous pleasure from appreciating and improving you skills in singing. Maybe some pieces are not what everyone would choose, but if you are a member of a 'gang' you stay together and try to get things right. Perhaps next time the piece will be of your liking! The main thing to remember is that we expect people to pay to come and hear us sing - so we should put on as good a performance as is possible.'

One member remembered that at one time the choir was financially so short of money that we had to run market stalls.....we all hope this doesn't become necessary again - standing in the rain was not something to be reminded of! '

'I joined WCS after the small choir I had been with lost their conductor. At my first rehearsal I found to my delight that I knew several of the members so immediately felt at home. At that time we boasted about 45-50 members and met in St Mary's Hall. In the intervals we gathered for juice brought by one of the members and stood around chatting and getting to know each other. It was a very friendly atmosphere. I was soon on the committee and took over the treasurer's office. Money was always a problem and we held market stalls to sell second hand goods to help boost the funds, not very productive, but profit usually paid for half a soloist! Mr Arbery was generous in allowing us to have the use of his shop windows to advertise our

concerts. I used to arrange these with a fellow alto: she would admit to being 'generously built' and we had a hilarious time getting her through the very narrow doors to the display windows, all great fun.'

'I have learned a lot, made great friends and enjoyed immensely being a member of the Choral Society.'

Article by Olive Price; expanded by John Deaton