

Choir notes January 2019

There's plenty to write about in this month's choir news - December and early January were full of excitement for the church choir. The Nine Lessons and Carols at Holy Trinity on 23 December were a great start to Christmas. Twice as many attended as in 2017, and the service went really well. Jeff had cunningly programmed the music that we'd be singing at Durham and St Paul's, so we were all in good voice and feeling confident.

But nothing ever goes quite as planned. Over Christmas most of the choir fell ill with a nasty flu-like virus, so the long-anticipated late December trip to sing four services in Durham Cathedral in 24 hours was a test of endurance. 25 of us made it into the choir stalls – Chris Nicholls was too poorly even to travel, and Christopher Gee made it to Durham but was not well enough to sing. Jeff made us warm up very gently, and passed around copious quantities of throat sweets, and we started to feel a little livelier.

Evensong on Saturday evening went well enough. It was great to see so many supporters from the parish smiling from the pews, including Norbert and his family! We headed out for a fantastic spread of Lebanese food ably organised by Kate Dobson, glad to have a "home match" for once.

Sunday wasn't too early a start, thankfully. There are always hiccups on these visits; processing while trying to sing a hymn for which we'd left the music in the choir stalls was a challenge! But otherwise Matins and Communion were fine and Jeff visibly started to relax. We had a good break before Evensong, for which we brought out our A-game. This was our best service so far, with magical moments including our rendition of Lauridsen's *O Magnum Mysterium*.

Durham Cathedral is breathtaking with a great acoustic and lovely clergy and staff. Our theory that, the more important the cathedral, the less stuffy the welcome, proved right again as Canon Simon Oliver and his team made us feel at home.

Fast-forward a week or so, and the choir gathered at St Paul's Cathedral on 7 January, entering via the crypt where security checked off all our names. Many of us were still not 100% fit. Derek Stone could not attend but luckily Peter Clucas was an experienced stand-in. The rehearsal went well in the choir school, and we were feeling confident.



We had heard that St Paul's, despite being very welcoming, are sticklers for etiquette. Alex, the lovely verger, terrified us about processing correctly, including walking in straight lines (should be easy but isn't) and turning smoothly on the brass star under the exact centre of the dome. All 33 of us plus Jeff headed to the choir stalls for our final rehearsal. Often we are pretty cramped but St Paul's choir stalls are huge. We were overwhelmed by the beauty and sheer size of the cathedral interior. And the acoustic is extraordinary – the sound lingers for ages! The lady cantor had a beautiful voice, but the men had fun trying to pitch their responses from much higher notes than usual.

We lined up for the service behind a large curtain, which was drawn back with a flourish on the stroke of 5pm, and off we marched. Both the Choir and the main body of the church were fairly full. It was wonderful to spot even more friendly faces from Bledlow and elsewhere, including both Norbert and Jennifer! The service was magical. Everything went as well as it possibly could have done; even our anthem, *Ommes de Saba*, which could so easily have come to pieces as it's fiendishly complicated. Cynthia's playing was, as usual, hugely impressive – we are so lucky to have her as our organist.

The choir owes a huge thank you to Jeff Stewart, our wonderful choirmaster. At times we wonder if he's been overambitious but his endless patience and confidence in our abilities help our small parish choir to do very exciting things. Now it's back to real life, and preparing for our next service. We love the cathedral visits but know that our most important role is supporting the worship of the parish.

Cathy Stone

