

Choir News - July and August 2025



Jeff returns from Majorca, with only two Thursday evening practices left before we are due to visit St Albans Cathedral. We haven't sung all the music yet, and what we have done, we've mostly done only once. But we have been practicing at home. We run straight through everything except the psalms, and at the end Jeff thanks us for our hard work, and says that it was better than he expected. Phew!

Jeff might have gone straight through everything with few pauses, corrections or embellishments to assess what needs doing, and perhaps most work is needed on '*Sing we merrily unto God our strength*' (Sidney Campbell 1909-1974), which is more terrifying at first sight than it really is on better acquaintance, and we have sung it before, long ago. There is a passage ending "...God of Jacob", where we sing a long note followed by two short notes, which involves counting the beats on the long notes, and we come in a bit ragged, so Jeff asks us to imagine that we have to do the hokey-cokey - a kind of one, two, three, KICK - and that improves it. Jeff says: "Watch me and I'll make you do it in the right time, because that's the kind of guy I am".

And we sing '*Sing we merrily*' in the Bledlow matins service on the following Sunday. Jeff suggests that we should not be put off by the upper and lower parts singing at different times.... pause for thought.... Jeff again: perhaps that's normal, but here it's intentional. Our numbers are down (2 sops, 3 altos, 1 tenor and 3 basses). We sing less than perfectly, but it is good practice, and we are reasonably merry.

On 22nd May, we launch into the music without a warm-up first. We sing the Mozart Mass that I wrote about last month. Sections of the music repeat, which is good, as if you get it wrong first time, you get another go. Jeff in the Sanctus remarks that there are bits of it which make you feel really nice. It is true! Mozart must have been continually positive and humorous to write music like this.

We will meet next in St Albans. Jeff mysteriously asks us to bring ear-plugs, cotton wool or earphones, but keeps the reason secret. A chorister suggests that it might be better for the congregation to have these things.

Then, off to St Albans. I expect that you might have been there and seen the magnificent reredos. The cathedral claims to have the longest nave in the UK. Winchester also seems to claim that, until you read the small print, and note that it has the longest nave of any gothic cathedral - St Albans is mostly Romanesque. The clergy are welcoming and invite us for drinks on the Saturday evening, where they tell us about Saint Alban, executed by the Roman authorities for harbouring a priest, then converting to Christianity, and refusing to renounce his faith.

Jeff apologises in advance for a new policy of naming people whom he wishes to correct. This, I think, is a good thing, as I have often not known if it is me doing it wrong or someone else. He just wants ever better results. He says that he will work us hard today. And it works! We sing well despite many pieces, and short learning time. And we sing perhaps more easily with less strain!

Psalms 118 contains advice to female choristers: "It is better to trust in the Lord than to put any confidence in man". Jeff asks for their views on this.

In our final practice we find out why Jeff asked for the cotton wool or ear plugs. We are instructed to put them in our ears before singing the Walmisley (1814-1856) Magnificat, to get the men singing more manly, and it works! But we do not sing with such devices during the service, as that would look very silly. The Sunday evensong is great to sing throughout. '*Achieved is the Glorious Work*' from Haydn's '*Creation*' is such a belter! And after that, we take photos, give thanks to Cynthia for her wonderful organ playing, and then we depart to travel home.

Then we have a week off after St Albans before we start preparation for the Pentecost Holy Communion service at Bledlow on 8th June. For this we have just one Thursday rehearsal. We sing the '*Wiltshire Service*

for *Holy Communion*' by Richard Shephard (1949-2021), which we have been singing at communion services for a year or two. Our first attempt is not too good, but it is simple, and we rapidly re-learn it.

The anthem for the service is '*Breathe on Me, Breath of God*' by Matthew Rogers. It is a fine piece, not totally easy, as there is a tricky change of key and speed in the middle, but it is quite catchy and difficult to stop humming it afterwards when cooking dinner etc.

After 21 years of singing with the church choir, Joy Mackman (see *picture above*) is stopping, for the simple reason that she is leaving Bledlow for Cape Town - with Colin of course! We shall have sung her praises on 22nd June as we say a sad farewell, but with joy in our hearts. She knows how much we have enjoyed singing with her. I checked back in the Choir News archives, and I think that Joy's own words from February 2020 sum up what the choir means to her:

So, my message to you all (young and of a certain age) is, "Go for it". Not necessarily singing, if you've no voice, but whatever interests you. Choir has given me more confidence, opportunities to sing in many cathedrals, make new friends, and apparently, it's good for my health! So, may I be able to struggle up the hill (OK, I do take the car if it's raining) for many more years to come and stay a part of "My Choir Family".

Our next service is choral evensong at St Mary & St Nicholas at Saunderton on 29th June: see you there!

Rob Hill