

Choir Notes. A View From The Stalls

A Short History of the Choir Robe

A new Vicar moved to Bledlow Parish and went out one Saturday to visit her parishioners. Spotting a rather grand house in Skittle Green, it being obvious someone was in, she knocked on the door, but receiving no reply she left a card. Revelation 3.20: 'Behold I stand at the door and knock. If any man hear my voice and open the door, I will come to him, and will dine with him, and he with me'.

Thinking no more about it, the following Sunday the vicar picked up a card, which had been left in the collection plate. Genesis 3.10: 'And he said, I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked.'

Thus we go seamlessly into this month's Choir Notes topic, 'The History of Choir Robes'!

Evidence of the first Choir Robes goes back to 425 BC. A painting was found on a fragment of Greek pottery portraying a choir both singing and playing musical instruments, all dressed in similar flowing gowns.

In England however we had to wait until Medieval times before a recognized choir could be found. Choirs then followed the dress of the clergy and wore white-sleeved surplices over a plain black ankle-length tunic.

During the Renaissance, church choirs grew in popularity in step with the growth of new musical compositions designated for church use. Whilst a separate look for the choir was established, there was no uniformity of colour or design.

The Reformation saw a dumbing down of all things religious and choirs adopted the Academic Regalia for doctoral graduates, a style which is still in use today.

The 18th and 19th centuries found an explosion of the finest church music ever, Beethoven, Mozart, Brahms, Verdi and Rossini to name but a few of the great composers. To emulate the music, heavy embroidery and elaborate stoles were used by some of the choirs.

So we come to today. When Jeff took over the choir for Holy Trinity there were about eight members, and, when it had grown to 28 it was agreed that robes should be purchased and so Jeff bought a job lot of brown, hooded habits, with red string belts for £10 off e-bay. Most people thought they were absolutely hideous and it was soon realized that the Friar Tuck look would never do. Just before our first cathedral visit to Christ Church Oxford our resplendent white surplices, white scarves and blue cassocks were acquired, following a fund raising concert.

It is an extraordinary thought that our robes, which stem back from a tradition going back to 425 BC, enhance the strength of unity that we all feel within the choir.

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