

## Choir News – February 2024



On 4<sup>th</sup> January we meet for the first time in the New Year. We have three services in the coming month; Evensong at Portsmouth Cathedral (left) on 13<sup>th</sup> January, then Matins on 21<sup>st</sup> January and Holy Communion on 11<sup>th</sup> February, both at Holy Trinity.

With only two rehearsals before we go to Portsmouth, we get cracking. Jeff starts us on a new anthem, *'Drop, Drop, Slow Tears'*, a setting by Margaret Woodley. Jeff assures us that if we do not manage to learn it in two weeks, he will pull an old chestnut out of his bottom drawer, so we shall succeed even if we fail.

We start on this lovely piece, dramatic even though slow, and it feels that we shall manage it. We spend most of the practice on it, but also sing once through the Canticles in D by Herbert Brewer (1865-1928). We have sung this many times before, so it is one of Jeff's emergency pieces that can be called upon at short notice. When we get an old favourite like this, we often belt it with little sophistication. Jeff says that we'll polish it next week. As indeed happens. We have a few new members who haven't sung the Brewer before, so Jeff makes slight concessions for them. It is not as long a practice as some when we are approaching a cathedral visit with new music, so Jeff must be confident that we can do it.

As indeed we do. The rehearsal in Portsmouth is straightforward, with only a few brickbats thrown at us. Jeff has been trying for some time to improve our posture. He says that you sing better if you stand up firmly, without leaning on the music stand or on your neighbour. He says, "You look, act and sing more alive if you stand straight... some of you look as if you have been dead a very long time!" He walks backwards to take some photos, with the bottom of his cassock passing through the flames of lit candles on the floor which are lighting a nativity scene. So he could have joined us. Must remember to look where the fire extinguishers are at any future services with low, lit candles! It would be fun - and necessary - to squirt Jeff with water if he were to catch alight next time.

The priest, Harriet, is charming and kind, and says that we were good and can come again.

I didn't previously know that Portsmouth had a cathedral. The acoustic there is very good. Originally it was a parish church. It became a cathedral in 1927 on the creation of the Diocese of Portsmouth out of the Diocese of Winchester, and was enlarged. The whole community of Portsmouth was excommunicated by the Pope because some sailors murdered the Bishop of Chichester, but that was way back in 1449, not recently.

Then we prepare with only one rehearsal for Matins on 21<sup>st</sup> January. We sing *'From the Rising of the Sun'* by F A Gore Ouseley (baronet, composer, organist, musicologist and priest, so an all-rounder, but Wikipedia doesn't mention cricket). I have liked his work since singing the marvelously gloomy *'Is it Nothing to You?'* on Good Fridays. This one is grand, rather than gloomy, but great to sing. There is a psalm, a sung Venite and a Benedictus, using chants from the Parish Psalter, so plenty of chanting. Lovely!

And for our next rehearsal on 25<sup>th</sup> January, Jeff sends a mysterious WhatsApp message around on the very day! Usually, he tells us what music we need to bring with us a day or two before so that we can print it, and perhaps listen to it on YouTube, or try to sing it. This time he just says that he will hand out the music at the rehearsal. It could be anything. What does he have up his sleeve? Messiaen? Shostakovich? Bartok? Or perhaps Schoenberg? No, it's worse than that. First up, he gets us to sing a piece called *'Does your Chewing Gum Lose its Flavour on the Bedpost Overnight?'*, seemingly devoid of religious content, but we pass on rapidly, so he seems not to intend it for a service. Perhaps we don't sing it well enough. He then hands out music by an English composer, Richard Shephard, for a Communion Service, to be sung in place of the Thorne Mass, which we have been singing throughout the ten years that I have been a choir member. How can we or the congregation deal with this radical change? Will there be a riot? I think not, but we cannot be sure until we try it.

After that shock, our kindly Choirmaster hands out *'The Lord hath been mindful of us'* by Samuel Sebastian Wesley. Do you know (I feel sure that you do) his *'Blessed be the God and Father'*, which Jeff allows us to sing occasionally as a treat? Ideally, it calls for a boy treble for the solo part, which is something that we do not have. The present piece has similarities to *'Blessed, etc.'*, but is shorter, and so a more convenient length. A rousing piece for our last service before Lent. We practice these pieces for the next two rehearsals in a concentrated and diligent fashion. The *'Chewing Gum'* song is followed by other exercises to get the rehearsals off to a flying start - literally, as he gets us singing while pretending to be aeroplanes flying round the church with arms out-strewn as wings.

What fun it is to be in a choir led by Jeff!

*Rob Hill*