

Choir News - and a bass's choirboy memories.

After fantastic efforts from all concerned, November 11th, Remembrance Sunday, saw the return of the congregation and choir to our skilfully renovated Holy Trinity Bledlow, when, following the Two Minute's silence and Reveille, the choir sang "For the Fallen" (They shall not grow old) to a setting written by Jeff Stewart and also, John Wiffen's "In Flanders Fields". A most moving service made even more poignant by the readings on the backgrounds of each of the fallen so carefully researched over the last year.

We robed again on Tuesday 13th for the formal Licencing of Norbert, as our Team Vicar for Bledlow Saunderton and Horsenden, by the Bishop of Buckingham. Another very memorable service where in addition to the usual appropriate hymns, we sang "O Be Joyful", to a lively arrangement by Howard Helvey, a modern United States composer.

We commenced Advent with the Carol Service at Saunderton on Sunday 2nd December and this included Magnificat in E flat by A.Herbert Brewer, organist of Gloucester Cathedral 1896-1928, Boris Ord's Adam lay y-bounden and the more recent, Martin How's Come Lord Jesus, two more famous organists. The service was followed by some very welcome festive refreshments.

By the time you read these notes, Holy Trinity Bledlow's Choir should already have sung at Durham Cathedral and be about to sing in St Paul's, both for which we are currently rehearsing.

I first became a chorister some 70 years ago in a very different Holy Trinity church in an adjoining deanery and would never have then dreamed of such a possibility for me ever occurring, let alone having already sung in the cathedrals of both Canterbury and Birmingham in the year!

My choirboy and other memories of the late 1940's and 1950's, I propose sharing in the following paragraphs.

Entry into the choir was usually at 7 or 8 years old (boys only) starting as probationers after having been on a waiting list. Sunday services with choir in attendance, were 11am Matins and 6.30pm Evensong and the first "duties" were to sit in the vicinity of the Organist and Chormaster during those services to watch the procedures.

The hymns and psalms were chosen from Ancient & Modern (occasionally Songs of Praise) and The New Cathedral Psalter.

Practices were twice a week - Wednesdays for boys only, held in a classroom in our adjoining C of E School and the full choir, (including what seemed to us then as mostly rather senior ladies), in the choirstalls in church, on Friday evenings, the total choir number being usually around 40 rising up to 50 or so at festivals with the return of National Service tenors or basses on leave. Some families were represented by as many as three generations - I was joined by my two younger brothers.

When it was considered appropriate, probationers were promoted to sitting in the front pews (cassocks only) for each service and then eventually finally admitted to the choir, by their receiving their surplices and RSCM certificates, at a formal ceremony during Evensong.

There were several weddings each month on Saturdays with sometimes two on one day, for which we each received a shilling. There were the usual seasonal anthems and annual renderings of John Stainer's Crucifixion and Handel's Messiah (once including the nightmare of the organist turning over three pages during the Hallelujah Chorus!). Sung communions were confined to Easter and Christmas usually to the Merbecke setting.

Each summer there was a coach outing to the sea, usually Brighton or Bognor, for the boys, who were each given half a crown to spend as well as being treated to fish and chips before the return journey.

Around the age of 10 - 11, several chosen would go off during the summer school holiday to a week's RSCM Summer School. This was held at a girls' boarding school, presumably temporarily leased to the RSCM, near Matlock in Darley Dale, Derbyshire. I went with two others in 1952. We were placed apprehensively, on a train from High Wycombe in the care of the Head Chorister of All Saints Parish Church High Wycombe, together with a larger number of boys from All Saints, for the duration of the journey. A completely new experience for me and my first journey to the "north"!

The days were taken up in chapel singing practices and classes separately in the school but luckily with some time off, for walking in the hills. Towards the end of the week we had individual tests on our singing abilities and a final chapel service and a report to hand to our choir masters at home. I wasn't very satisfied with mine - I was

one of the few not to have had piano lessons and our choirmaster seemed content in the circumstances. I still have it somewhere but luckily I have not been required to show it to Jeff or Cynthia!

1952 was also when I joined RGS High Wycombe and was soon to find myself in the choir there, where those of us who were also church choristers, were required to bring their robes for the annual school confirmation and prize giving services, and once for the headmaster's daughter's society wedding - an amalgam of various shades of blue and black (I think there might also have been some green)!

As a choir we also undertook large serious works such as Elijah, Creation and Hiawatha, and there was the annual Gilbert and Sullivan opera, where boys took all the female parts - not as is the current practice I believe, of joint productions with the High School! I confined myself to taking part in my final year, as the boatswain in HMS Pinafore!

During the years at RGS my voice inevitably changed to bass, with a brief time as a tenor. I continued in my original Holy Trinity Choir until leaving home in late 1965. During those years there were many events, perhaps brought closer to home, by members of our choir on National Service. One in the Royal Marines, parachuted into Egypt in the 1956 Suez crisis, he luckily survived, but another, an RAF pilot, was later shot down and killed over Aden and another, a tenor and RAF photographer, sent to film the nuclear explosions over Christmas Island. He happily returned and continued the tenor solos in the Crucifixion and Messiah.

I returned to my first choir once more many years later, for our Organist and Choirmaster's funeral service, when our affection and gratitude for all the time he spent on us over so many years, was shown by each of us laying a red rose on the organ as we processed by.

Back in the present we are currently rehearsing for the Christmas music here and of course our visits to Durham and St Paul's under the amazing direction of Jeff and Cynthia – I just wish I had joined this Holy Trinity Choir earlier!

Christopher Gee