



PETERBOROUGH CATHEDRAL OLD CHORISTERS' ASSOCIATION

2023 NEWSLETTER

PETERBOROUGH CATHEDRAL

The Benedictine Abbey of Peterborough was an extremely important place of pilgrimage in the Middle Ages. The monastery was considered so very special that pilgrims – whether king, bishop, knight or peasant – put off their shoes when they passed through the West gate of the precincts. Many Royal visitors came to the Abbey to view the precious relics there, in particular the arm of St. Oswald. Mary de Bohun, Countess of Derby (the first wife of Henry Bolingbroke, later King Henry IV) died in childbirth at Peterborough Abbey in 1394; she passed away in the castle which formerly stood on the north side of the Cathedral, hard by the Prior's lodging, in what later became the Deanery garden.

It is all too easy for those of us who have had the privilege of singing in this glorious building to take it for granted. The Minster, arguably one of the most underrated cathedrals in the country, contains so many superb treasures. The chief glory of the building is the sublime and matchless West front, which is deemed by countless people to be one of the most beautiful in England. Canon Owen Davys, writing in 1868, said: "It is regarded by numerous great authorities as the noblest of the West fronts of the Churches of Christendom". The Revd. Walter Sweeting, Headmaster of The King's School from 1875-1881 and before that Second Master for many years, lived opposite the Cathedral for two decades. In his guide to the Minster (1898) he wrote: "Probably nobody speaks or thinks of Peterborough Cathedral without immediately associating it with its glorious west front".

The long and lofty Norman nave of ten bays, which is both supremely dignified and well-proportioned, is one of the finest in Britain. It represents the last phase of the Romanesque in the kingdom. With the possible exception of Durham Cathedral, no grander Norman building exists in these islands. When Dr. Hensley Henson visited Peterborough Cathedral in 1937, he told the then Bishop (Dr. Claude Blagden): "If I didn't come from Durham, I would put Peterborough first". The superb wooden ceiling of the Nave is unique in England and dates from the first half of the 13th century. It is the largest of only four ceilings of this period surviving in the whole of Europe and is of international significance. (In February of this year it came second in a national 'Cathedral Treasures' competition).

The ornate brass eagle lectern in the centre of the choir was given by Abbot William de Ramsey (1471-1496) and Prior John Malden. The splendid choir stalls and canopies, which are of the finest oak, were made by Messrs. John Thompson and Co. of Peterborough. Below the canopies are figures of saints, abbots, bishops, deans, etc connected with the Abbey and Cathedral since Saxon times. The stalls date from the early eighteenth-century, as do the choir pulpit and Bishop's throne. They were designed by John Loughborough Pearson, who also conceived the elaborate Cosmati floor of the presbytery which is executed in Italian marble. Pearson's beautiful ciborium over the High altar was inspired by that of Santa Maria in Cosmedin in Rome; the pillars are of Italian marble, while the upper parts are Derbyshire alabaster.

Beyond the noble and impressive apse – “one of the great sights of England” - is the eastern chapel or retrochoir, still called ‘The New Building’ despite the fact that it was erected in the early 16th century during the abbacy of Robert Kirkton, 1496-1528. The abbot's rebus is carved on a frieze around the walls. It is a superb example of late Perpendicular architecture, roofed by one of the finest fan vaults in the country. This delicate and beautiful ceiling was almost certainly designed by John Wastell, the creator of a similar fan vault at King's College, Cambridge. Old choristers will recall with pleasure the splendid acoustics of the ‘New Building’: Dr. Stanley Vann always used this part of the Cathedral for the singing of a motet before Sunday evensong.

In the North quire aisle is the tomb of Queen Katharine of Aragon, the much-wronged first wife of King Henry VIII; while the resting place of the ill-fated Mary, Queen of Scots, Henry's grand-niece, was on the south side of the chancel (and not, as is often supposed, in the South quire aisle itself). She was buried in the Cathedral in August 1587, but was only destined to lie there for five-and-twenty years. In 1612, her son King James I (and VI of Scotland) had her body removed to Westminster Abbey, where her tomb may be seen to this day. The six recumbent effigies of abbots of the monastery lie in the North and South quire aisles; they were originally sited in the Chapter House, on the east side of the cloisters. They are probably the best figures of Benedictine monks in England, splendid representations in stone and Alwalton marble. One could continue ad infinitum, but space is limited. Suffice it to say that, when “we summon up remembrance of times past”, Peterborough Cathedral must always hold a very special place in the hearts of those who have been privileged to sing within its ancient walls.

COMMITTEE CHANGES

TIM HURST-BROWN joined the OCA committee fifty years ago shortly after leaving school. He was Hon. Secretary of the Association for thirty years and became chairman in 2017. Earlier this year, he felt that the time was ripe for him to step down and hand over the reins to a younger person. At the AGM he was thanked for his long years of loyal service and was elected as a Vice-President of the organisation. He has agreed to continue to compile the annual newsletter. This publication, which keeps old choristers in touch with the Cathedral and with each other, is much appreciated by members in all parts of the globe.

CHRISTOPHER BATHURST has penned the following tribute to TH-B: “First of all, may I sincerely thank you and congratulate you on your fifty-year service to the Association. I think this is unparalleled in our history. It is a great achievement to have kept the OCA on an even keel in ever changing circumstances and under very varied Deans when some other Associations have fallen by the wayside. Secondly, I was delighted to hear that you have been elected a Vice-President. This is a richly deserved and appropriate honour in recognition of the vast time and effort you have put in over the years. Thirdly, I was very pleased to learn that you will continue to edit the Annual Newsletter as I think your knowledge of the Cathedral, and Peterborough in general, is unequalled”.

Tim's successor as chairman is MATTHEW HARDY, who has been a member of the committee for many years. We wish him well as he takes over this very responsible role and assure him of our support.

NEW MEMBERS

We extend a very warm welcome to the following young people who have recently joined Peterborough Cathedral Old Choristers' Association:

EVA KOUUMDJIEFF, IMANNI LILLY-WEST, IMOGEN LIDDLE,
ROXANNE RAHI, LILA MCAULIFFE and EDWARD SANYAOLU.

2024 REUNION

Our next gathering will be held at the Cathedral on Saturday 8 June 2024. Please make a note of this date in your diary NOW and make every effort to join us.

ANDREW DAVID TORBELL, 1948-2023

Andy Torbell, who has died from oesophageal cancer aged 75, was a pillar of the Old Choristers' Association. Very few reunions took place without his genial presence and it would be true to say that he was one of our staunchest supporters.

Andrew was born in Peterborough on 31 January 1948. His family worshipped at St. Paul's Church in the city and Andrew sang in the choir there from the age of seven. Later on, he auditioned for the Cathedral choir and was a chorister from 1958-1962. In his last months, he was Head Chorister. He was always extremely grateful for the wonderful musical training that he received from Stanley Vann.

He was educated at Walton Junior School, where he passed the 'eleven plus' examination before entering King's in September 1959. After taking 'A' levels, Andrew left school in the summer of 1965 and joined Barclays' Bank. His parents moved to Northampton the following year and Andrew transferred to Barclays' in that town. In 1973, he married Janet Underwood at Kingsthorpe Parish Church: this was to be a very happy marriage which lasted for half a century.

For some time Andrew was based in Grantham, where he completed his ACIB examinations. It was during this period that the depression which was to dog his life first manifested itself. In 1980 he moved to Barclays' Bank in Corby. Not long after his arrival in the town, he joined the local Male Voice Choir. In 1998 he was appointed Musical Director of the choir, conducting the ensemble for the next two decades. He often travelled abroad with CMVC, greatly enjoying the camaraderie engendered on these trips. In what little spare time he had, Andrew was a keen football referee, played bowls and was treasurer of his local church. He was involved with Talking Newspapers for many years and also helped out at a local school, assisting children who were struggling with their classwork. He was also an avid supporter of his local football team, 'The Steelmen', and always kept an eye on the fortunes of Peterborough United ('The Posh').

Following a short period of ill-health earlier this year, Andrew was admitted to Kettering General Hospital towards the end of March and died at home on 18 April, ten days before he and Janet would have celebrated their Golden Wedding. A service of thanksgiving for his life was held at his parish church in Corby on 11 May, where the eulogy was delivered by TIM HURST-BROWN, his cousin. Among the large congregation was old chorister TONY DAVIS, a lifelong friend of Andy's.

Andrew and Janet had two children, Neil and Kathryn, and three grandchildren. We extend our sincere condolences to them. Requiescat in pace.

JOHN STRICKSON, 1930-2023

The composer and organist John Strickson died on 17 March at home in his native Huddersfield at the age of ninety-two. He grew up in Peterborough and learned to play the organ when he was in his teens. He was Assistant Organist at Peterborough Cathedral in the early nineteen fifties. Later he became organist and choir master at Holy Trinity Church, Stratford-upon-Avon (Shakespeare's resting place), where he served from 1954-1979 (one of his choirboys was The Very Revd. Ian Black, now Dean of Newport). John taught music at Stratford Girls' Grammar School, conducted the Stratford Choral Society (sometimes teaming up with the RSC) and was conductor of the Coventry Philharmonic Society from 1964-1968. He also conducted the Warwickshire Symphony Orchestra (founded by Stanley Vann in 1940) from 1958-1968. One of his sons is the actor Mark Strickson; the other is the academic Dr. Adam Strickson. We tender our sympathy to them both in their sad loss.

THE REVD. JULIAN THOMPSON, 1935-2023

Julian Thompson, sometime Tenor supernumerary during the nineteen sixties and later Precentor of Ely Cathedral, died on 2 January 2023. He had been a parish priest in the Diocese of Ely for many years. In retirement, Julian lived at Great Massingham in Norfolk. We extend our condolences to his family.

JAMES WILLIAM ANDREW DYER, 1987-2023.

We were saddened to learn of the passing of James Dyer, who died earlier this year aged 36. He was a chorister at New College, Oxford, and later a Lay Vicar of Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin. On graduating from Trinity College, Dublin James came to Peterborough as a tenor lay clerk and served in this capacity from 2010-2018. During this time, he was also a leading figure in the 900th anniversary appeal which raised several millions for the fabric of the Cathedral. He then moved to the National Trust to help with fundraising. Last year James was diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumour, but fought valiantly against this insidious disease. His funeral service was held at Exeter College, Oxford on 17 August. We send our sincere condolences to his wife Keely, his parents and his sister.

PERSONALIA

PHILIP BROWN sings with St. Peter's Church choir at Leckhampton near Cheltenham. He continues to enjoy his cars – an MGC GT (1969) and a vintage Riley Kestrel (1934). He does woodturning and has recently taken up portrait pastel drawing. Phil also derives much pleasure from the model railway in his basement. He tells us he remembers Peterborough with very great affection.

DAVID BUTT PHILIP played the role of the Prince in Dvorak's "Rusalka" at Covent Garden in March. He goes from strength to strength and is now one of the most sought-after tenors in the United Kingdom. Future performances include "Die Meistersinger von Nurnberg" in Vienna (Walther); the title role in "Lohengrin", also in Vienna; "Fidelio" in Munich (Florestan); "Daphne" in Berlin (Apollo); and "Carmen" in Berlin (Don Jose). We extend our warmest congratulations to him on his burgeoning career.

DAVID CLIFTON was Director of Music at St. Paul's, Onslow Square and later contemporary music leader and director of the children's choir at Holy Trinity, Brompton. He was then Director of Music for the three churches in the Tollington parish. David subsequently became Director of Music at the Apostles Anglican Church in Knoxville, Tennessee. In 2020 he was appointed Artist in Residence at Wycliffe College, Oxford. His role here involves overseeing and developing conventional and contemporary music in the daily chapel services and also lecturing on the theology, model and practice of Church music. He encourages people to build on the best of the old and the best of the new, and also to maintain the rich traditions of our wonderful choral heritage.

FRANK CLOSE, one of our staunchest members, has recently been extremely ill. Following the discovery of a tumour on his spine, he was informed that he was suffering from non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. This was isolated from his spine and he was able to be treated by chemotherapy. During the difficult eighteen weeks of treatment he wrote yet another book entitled "Destroyers of Worlds" (a prequel and sequel to the film 'Oppenheimer') to help pass the time! Having completed the chemo, he now has fifteen days of radiotherapy to undergo during December. We send him our very warmest wishes for a complete recovery and look forward to seeing him at the next reunion.

PETER DAVIES was unable to attend this year's reunion. He sent his apologies via email, in which he reminisced about the clergy from his days in the choir. These included Dr. Claude Blagden, Bishop of Peterborough 1927-1949; The Very Revd. Noel Christopherson, Dean 1943-1965; and the Revd. Dr. Donald ('The Quack') Southeard, Minor Canon and Precentor 1946-1951.

MARK DUTHIE was Assistant Organist at Peterborough Cathedral from 1994-2007. During this time he founded and directed the Girls' choir. He then became Organist and Master of the Choristers at Brecon Cathedral. After ten years in Wales, Mark and his family moved to Cumbria when he was appointed as Director of Music at Carlisle Cathedral.

STEVEN GRAHL, who was at Peterborough Cathedral from 2014-2018, has been appointed Director of Music at Trinity College, Cambridge from January 2024. He left Peterborough to become Organist at Christ Church, Oxford and an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Music at Oxford University. Steven said: "I am honoured to take up the position of Director of Music at Trinity and will strive to sustain and develop the musical life of the College. I am sorry to leave Christ Church, but I am looking forward to beginning my work with the choir of Trinity College, Cambridge in the new year". We extend our warmest congratulations to Steven on this well-deserved appointment.

PETER GREENWOOD, after receiving the 2022 communique, wrote: "Many congratulations on the latest newsletter – a true tour-de-force. Fascinating from beginning to end. Your piece about Peter Nicholson brought back many happy memories and who'd have thought that Sir John Betjeman attended weekday evensong when I was in the choir".

RICHARD HILLIER is currently a governor of Durham Cathedral School and is also chairman of Durham Cathedral Choir Association. He is a Visiting Fellow at St. John's College in the University of Durham.

NEIL HOWE has now retired from the printing and packaging industry and currently devotes himself to motorsport. He presently builds, maintains and races historic cars which takes him all over the UK and Europe. He spent many years singing tenor with the Cambridge Chorale, taking part in concerts, recordings and European tours. He is so grateful to Stanley Vann for his introduction to the world of music. Neil and his wife Angela (who also sings) have two daughters who both perform with choirs.

SIMON KIRKBRIDE was recently appointed an Honorary Member of The Royal Northern College of Music for his services to the industry. He has worked closely with RNCM over the years, enabling many students to form connections with the music scene in Bergen. Simon studied at The Royal College of Music and since graduating has sung with many prestigious companies including WNO, Glyndebourne, ENO, Norwegian Opera and at Aix-en-Provence. He has sung in concerts in many different countries and performed under such outstanding conductors as Sir Barnard Haitink, Sir Charles Mackerras and Sir David Willcocks.

RIK (RICHARD) LUDLOW unfortunately suffered a stroke recently, but thankfully has recovered with few side effects. It was good to see him at this year's reunion.

ANDREW MADDOCKS, former Head Chorister and Head Boy of The King's School, still enjoys his singing. He meets up on a regular basis with a pianist friend to sing a good deal of twentieth century English songs and nineteenth century lieder.

RALPH McDONALD was a Bass lay clerk at Peterborough from 1980-1988. He also taught flute and singing at Uppingham School. Ralph has worked as a freelance soloist and also with the Hilliard Ensemble. He has broadcast widely on Radio 3 and 4. He is much in demand as a recitalist and oratorio soloist. Since 1991 he has been an examiner for Trinity College London and has toured all over the world as an examiner/adjudicator. He lives near Stroud in the Cotswolds.

SIMON PEARCE played keyboard in the orchestra for "Sister Act", which was presented by the Peterborough Operatic Society in the Cathedral at the beginning of June. He tells us it proved to be a very nostalgic visit to his old haunts.

JIM PERCIVAL and his wife Jo live in France. He is Chef de Coeur of a small choir called "Vox d'Ete" and tells us he is so grateful to Stanley Vann for his wonderful training. Jim and Jo have seven grandchildren, all of whom are a great source of joy to them.

BECKY PICK was the leading lady in Gilbert and Sullivan's "Iolanthe", staged at the Maddermarket Theatre in Norwich at the beginning of May. She played Phyllis in the production, which was performed by the East Norfolk Operatic Society. Becky, who studied at the University of East Anglia after leaving The King's School, still lives in Norwich.

ANDREW REID has left County Durham and is now Director of Music at Little St. Mary's Church, Cambridge. He knows the city well, having read Music at St. Catharine's College and later taking his M.Phil at Robinson College.

MICK RENDLE attended the reunion on 17 June, along with his wife Dacia. The couple live near Portsmouth and, although they have often visited Peterborough and the Cathedral in the past, this is the first Old Choristers' reunion that Mick has attended since he left the choir in 1956. His father was Head Verger of the Cathedral in the 'fifties and early 'sixties and the Rendle family lived at number 2, Minster Precincts, next door to the Becket Chapel. Mick therefore had no excuse to be late for choir practice!

ANDREW TOMLINSON is a set and production designer based in London, whose work encompasses fashion, film and photography. He has collaborated with numerous well-known photographers and his work has featured at London Fashion Week, the Port Eliot Festival and the Cannes Film Festival.

PETER WATTS greatly enjoyed last year's OC publication: "A very interesting newsletter. Always a good read and I'm sure all Tim's hard work is appreciated by everyone".

IAN WHITE is now Chief Operating Officer and Chapter Clerk of Blackburn Cathedral. In a recent newsletter issued by the Cathedral, he wrote: "I was a chorister at Peterborough Cathedral under the legendary Dr. Stanley Vann. Dr. Vann's musical style was intimate, beautifully shaped, utterly precise and built on discipline. He marshalled his diverse forces in the front and back row with minute attention to detail.....His greatest legacy, for me, is a love of psalmody".

PAUL WHITEHEAD sent an e-mail at the end of December 2022: "Many thanks for the newsletter, including the piece about Peter Nicholson, who I always looked up to. Great voice, great overall 'manner'".

With every good wish for Christmas and the New Year,

Tim Hurst-Brown

Editor

Mobile: 07734 510 815

Email: timhurst-brown@outlook.com

PLEASE DON'T FORGET TO PUT THE DATE OF OUR NEXT REUNION IN YOUR DIARY – SATURDAY 8 JUNE 2024.

PETERBOROUGH CATHEDRAL OLD CHORISTERS' ASSOCIATION

Patron: The Bishop of Peterborough.

President: The Dean of Peterborough.

Vice-Presidents:

Canon Tim Alban Jones, Vice-Dean; Canon Steve Benoy, Missioner;
Canon Rowan Williams, Precentor; Christopher Gower; Tim Hurst-Brown;
and John Harrison, Headmaster of The King's School.

Chairman: Matt Hardy

Mobile: 07578 405 697

Email: matt.hardy1@hotmail.com

Hon. Secretary: Louise Laprun

Mobile: 07595 440 279

Email: pcoca.secretary@gmail.com

Hon. Treasurer: Samuel Barber

Mobile: 07549 909 956

Email: pcoca.treasurer@gmail.com

Committee: The Director of Music and the Precentor (ex officio), Anna Maria Barnes, Elizabeth Cunningham, Sophie Eser, Oliver Hamilton-Box (Hon. Auditor and Once a Chorister representative), Bradley Odep, Mark Robertshaw, Alex Spires and Chloe Spires.

STOP PRESS

LOUISE LAPRUN, OUR HARDWORKING HONORARY SECRETARY, HAS INDICATED THAT SHE WISHES TO STEP DOWN FROM THIS ROLE AT THE 2024 AGM. OUR VERY GRATEFUL THANKS ARE DUE TO HER FOR HER EXCELLENT WORK OVER THE PAST FIVE YEARS. SHE HAS BEEN HIGHLY EFFICIENT AND QUITE INDEFATIGABLE. WE NOW NEED TO FIND A WORTHY SUCCESSOR TO TAKE OVER THIS IMPORTANT POST.