

## The Radcliffe on Trent Male Voice Choir's first 40 years - 1983-2023

*To begin at the beginning ....* how better to introduce a male voice choir founded by a Welshman than to use the same words that opened Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood*? The Choir's founder and first Musical Director was Clive Sims BA, LRAM, from Penygraig in the Rhondda.

*.... from small acorns ....* on 30<sup>th</sup> June 1983 Clive convened a meeting of those interested in forming a Male Voice Choir and so planted the seed for what has roots in a membership that spread rapidly from Radcliffe, throughout Nottinghamshire and into neighbouring counties; when the Choir gave its first concert, in Radcliffe on 26<sup>th</sup> November 1983, 28 men were enrolled. Clive directed the Choir on another 46 occasions, including its first appearances at Belvoir Castle and Southwell Minster, and added 83 pieces to the repertoire, several in his own arrangements and some in Welsh. After the Llantrisant Male Voice Choir visited Radcliffe in October 1986, Clive took his Choir to Llantrisant where, in May 1987, it performed to great acclaim, which was a triumph for Clive. By 1988 the Choir had 55 members who had received the distinctive blue jackets which are often praised for being as smart now as when introduced. Clive last directed his Choir in the Royal Concert Hall, Nottingham, on 20<sup>th</sup> December 1988.

Clive was followed by Richard Howarth who first appeared as Musical Director on 3<sup>rd</sup> February 1989, in Southwell Minster. He is a baritone who, after studying at the Guildhall School of Music, joined Kent Opera. Richard remained with the Choir until April 2009. He directed it in over 345 performances and introduced more than 90 new pieces with the exhortation '*watch me!*' because, as with Clive, performances were without scores. Chris Burton became MD on 24<sup>th</sup> April 2009 but following appointment to a position at Winchester only directed the Choir until 4<sup>th</sup> June 2011. However, he organised an arrangement of *Nunc Dimittis* for the Choir by Alex Paterson, a Birmingham Conservatoire student, and directed the Choir when that was premiered in Birmingham Anglican Cathedral in September 2010.

In its earlier years the Choir benefitted from two outstanding accompanists, Alex Denman, from March 1989, and, from September 1999, the brilliant Eleonora Babitskaya who had been judged 'best accompanist' in the International Tchaikovsky and other competitions in Russia. She remains warmly linked to the Choir after playing with us for over twenty years as accompanist.

Subsequent Musical Directors of the Choir have included Victoria Barlow and Michael Bonshor. Michael strongly promoted the health benefits of singing and being a member of such a choir to us all and in recruitment, using the evidence of their value to physical and mental health and social wellbeing.

Deborah Davies, originally Associate Musical Director, was appointed MD in 2020 and has brought her experience, energy and skill to enhance our recent performances. She saw us through the pandemic with rehearsals at first on Zoom and then in the airy barn at Screveton eco farm, where the chickens and cows were enthralled by our talents. With two other admirable women, Judy Holroyd and now Sue Bennett, replacing Eleonora, we again

have great support from the piano. Kieran Seymour, Head of Music at Toot Hill School, joined us as Associate MD last year and brings additional techniques and enthusiasm to complete the excellent Music Team that now leads us. They continue the traditions of a Male Voice Choir and are keen to develop the choir and the ways we can bring in more men of all ages to sing together. The Choir still has three of the Founder members among its 51 men.

The Choir has made over 540 public appearances in more than 220 venues in England and Wales, and 18 overseas. It has performed over 310 secular and ecclesiastical pieces from an eclectic repertoire spanning four centuries and often described as '*from Byrd to The Beatles*'. As well as English, items have been sung in Breton, French, German, ancient Hispanic, Italian, Latin, Welsh and Zulu, and some in both the original language and English.

In most years since 1997 the Choir has made a short tour with a recital given in an Anglican cathedral. These ranged from the cavernous (Liverpool) to the relatively diminutive (Birmingham) and include, from north (Durham) to south (Exeter), east (Norwich) to west (Hereford, Llandaff Cardiff), and 12 in between, including York Minster. Covid created a pause, but the Choir resumed its touring with a very successful trip to East Yorkshire this April. The Choir performed in Beverley and Hull Minsters and enjoyed joint concerts with a mixed voice choir in Cottingham and a male voice choir in Driffield, followed of course by the customary 'afterglow', with many voices joining the singing in a local pub.

Other memorable performances were at Cardiff Arms Park (in the *World Choir* and with Shirley Bassey, 1993), at Buckminster (Leics.) in May 2012, with Sheku Kanneh-Mason (*just 13!*) and his sister Isata, in London's Royal Albert Hall (the 2016 *London Welsh Festival of Male Chords*), the Banqueting House (Whitehall Palace), the Royal Hospital (Chelsea), the fo'csle of the '*Cutty Sark*' (Greenwich), the Royal Concert and Albert Halls, and National Ice Centre (Nottingham), the NEC (Birmingham), Kedleston and Kelham halls, Papplewick Pumping Station, Newark Castle grounds, theatres in Newark and Skegness, the *Eden Project* (Cornwall), and on the cruise liner '*Silver Wind*' (Pool of London) and a Brittany Ferry. The Choir featured in Central Television's '*Heart of the Country*' programme in February 1993.

Short visits have been made to Belgium, France and Germany. Several members joined the *World Choir* in Atlanta, USA, in 1994 and the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Choir was celebrated with a week in Rome in 2008, when several pieces were sung in Italian. Another extended tour, to South Africa in 2000, was promoted by a choir that visited Radcliffe in 1999; in addition to this and the Llantrisant choir, others from England and Wales, and from Germany, Russia and The Netherlands, have been hosted in Radcliffe.

The Choir became a registered Charity in December 1996 and in 1999 the then MP for Rushcliffe, Kenneth Clarke, became its President and has been a great supporter of the Choir since then. Fund raising through its public performances is an important part of the Choir's activities and has benefitted many local and national causes, some nominated by members as beneficiaries of its Christmas Concerts. Singing carols in Radcliffe care homes began in December 1993 and became a popular annual event. Records indicate that in its 40 years the Choir has helped raise over £400,000 for charitable causes. Current members look

forward to the Choir continuing to enjoy singing together, entertaining audiences and providing benefit to charities – and of course to the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, a mere 10 years away.

Our 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary was marked by a very successful concert in St Mary's Church, Radcliffe on 27<sup>th</sup> May 2023. We were joined by the wonderful Derwent Brass and six superb soloists who formed the semi-chorus in Biebl's Ave Maria. There was a large audience who were universally positive in their praise for the whole performance, which brought together people who joined the choir only this year and at least one of our founder members. We also raised over £1000 for Prostate Cancer UK. So the choir is still going strong after forty years and looking forward to another milestone - a concert planned for Southwell Minster on Friday May 10<sup>th</sup> 2024 - and of course this year's Christmas Carol Concert, on December 16<sup>th</sup>.

*Geoff Warrington, RMVC Archivist and Malcolm Dillon, Secretary, June 2023*