

Westminster Abbey Choir School: 1915-2015

A talk by William Wallace, January 2016

There have been child singers at the Abbey since the Middle Ages. Edward Pine, senior master at the Choir School for several years after it reopened in 1947, writes in *The Westminster Abbey Singers* (Dobson, London, 1953) that there is a reference to boys singing at the Abbey in 1388, and to payment for clothes for a boy chorister in 1388. Others suggest there were occasional singing boys as early as 1290, singing for Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine, or even 1170. The first reference to payment for a master to teach the singing boys is in 1479, with continuing payments through the reign of Henry VII and until the dissolution of the monastery. Then, as through the remaining years of Tudor and Stuart rule, music in the Abbey was often provided by singers and organists who also served the Chapel Royal and the court.

After the turmoil of the reformation and Marian restoration, Queen Elizabeth in 1560 established a choral foundation, which included a master of the choristers, 10 boy choristers, assisted by a further 12 'singing boys' and a number of probationers, as well as 12 lay vicars. Their education was provided by the grammar school – Westminster School – which choristers attended 'at least two hours during each weekday'. It's probable that some boarded with the master of the choristers, while others came in from nearby every day. A separate organist accompanied services. Records show boy choristers performing plays and 'pageants' for the City of London and for others. Orlando Gibbons and – after the 1660 Restoration – his son Christopher composed for the choir and acted as organists; John Blow and Henry Purcell followed them, combining their duties in the Abbey with other responsibilities in the Chapel Royal, the court, St. Paul's, and elsewhere. Only eight choristers are recorded at singing at James II's coronation, but numbers rose again after the Glorious Revolution.

During the 18th century choristers lived at home in the bustling streets of Westminster and beyond. They were formally members of Westminster School, and in the eighteenth century were caught up in the indiscipline that school suffered; at least two drowned in the Thames while swimming. Boys were paid for attendance at services; the quality of their musical performance depended on the varying quality of those who rehearsed them. In 1848 a separate choir school was established, for boys coming in each day – one walked in from Clapham, until his two younger brothers also joined the choir and their father brought them in by horse and cart. This school was a single room by the dark cloister, with rehearsals in the organist's house nearby. Payment was made to choristers 'in lieu of boarding'. There was a fire in the school room, but no heating in the Abbey; chilblains were a common chorister ailment.

In 1877 a boarding school was completed, to provide a more secure foundation for the choir in an increasingly crowded city. It was in Little South Street, roughly at the back of Church House; the roughness of the neighbourhood, as the slums of Westminster lapped over into the Abbey precincts, were one reason for building a second, in 1891. This housed a core of choristers, with others coming in every day; heating was rudimentary, and in spite of an uncritical write-up in *The Boys Own Paper* when it opened had poor sanitation. Discipline, teaching, voice trials and rehearsal time had all been tightened, in this period of late-Victorian improvement; and the school was inadequate for the Abbey's ambitions. So at the beginning of the 20th century, under a precentor who also served as headmaster of the choir school, W.B.Dams (uncle of the post-1945 precentor), a larger choir school in Dean's Yard was planned.

The original plans included two houses for minor canons as well as the Choir School, on the opposite side of Dean's Yard from Westminster School, arranged slightly differently from the final building, which made space for a minor canon and a headmaster's house. The choir school thus came back within the Abbey precincts. It had far more space than its predecessor, with several class rooms, accommodation for staff, play space on the top floor, and practice rooms overlooking Great Smith Street. It was opened in 1915 – and narrowly escaped damage when a bomb bounced off its walls in 1918. The dormitories were divided into partitioned spaces, as they are again now; the partitions must have disappeared during the Second World War. It accepted both boarders and day-boys; parents of boarders were expected to pay £50 towards board, lodging, 'and laundry'. All boys were expected to learn a musical instrument, and voice trials were sharply competitive. Sydney Nicholson, who succeeded the elderly Frederick Bridge as organist in 1918, had strong views on the development of English church music; he expanded the choir to around 50 in total, including day boys who enable the choir to maintain sung services throughout the year. He took the choir on its first overseas tour in 1927, travelling by sea to Canada in January and returning in March – taking school books as well as music and warm winter clothes to maintain their lessons. When Nicholson left the Abbey to form the Royal School of Church Music in 1928, with Ernest Bullock replacing him, both choir and school had become far more professional.

The finances of Abbey and Choir School were shaky after 1918; having built this impressive building, there were discussions in the early 1920s as to whether a boarding school could be afforded. Then, as on several similar occasions later, the Abbey turned to look for donors through an appeal, and chapter and choir school survived.

Harry Barnes, who remained at the Abbey as a lay vicar throughout his life and regularly rehearsed the choristers through the 1940s and 1950s, was a chorister in these years; so was David Willcocks. They and others sang services every day, with three on Sundays. Swimming in the Marsham Street baths, a scout troop, games in Vincent Square, and sporting matches against other choir schools, were already part of school life. There were several leaving scholarships, for Westminster and other public schools. There appear to have been far fewer special services than after 1947, but the 1937 Coronation was a high point. There is a story that Ossie Peasgood, already then sub-organist, was asked to work through several pieces of music that were submitted as candidates to be sung at the coronation, and dismissed an item entitled 'There'll always be an England' as entirely unsuitable.

When war again broke out in 1939, the choir school, like others, was evacuated, to Christ's Hospital in Horsham. As the war lengthened and bombs fell on London it was decided to disband both school and choir; the school building was requisitioned by the army to house women in the ATS. William McKie, an Australian then in Oxford, had just been appointed Abbey organist, but immediately joined the RAF, leaving Ossie Peasgood holding the fort: a man described by a wartime chorister as 'a brilliant organist though a hopeless choir master'. He nevertheless organised a 'London choir' of day boys who travelled in from all across London, to rehearse on Thursday evenings and sing two services on Sundays.

McKie inherited this choir on his return from war service. One day one of the boys told him that he had noticed Field Marshal Montgomery sitting in a stall for the service, and McKie, who knew that Montgomery had an apartment not far away, sent him a note. Invited to tea, and asked what Monty could do for the choir, he immediately answered 'Give us our Choir School back', and the army released it shortly afterwards. The building had again been struck by a bomb, without exploding; there were layers of army polish on the floors, but otherwise it was undamaged. So the boarding school was reconstituted, utilising some of the furniture the army left behind to make up for postwar shortages – we were not sure if the iron bedsteads in the dormitories had come out of

the Abbey stores or were army issue. The school interior was stone, varnish and cream: institutional, even regimented, but we had not expected luxury.

McKie chose to retain half of the 'London' choir and to recruit the rest from the outside. From a large number of applicants for the headship the dean and Chapter chose Edward Thompson: a man without any academic qualifications who had nevertheless a very strong reputation; he had devoted a lot of his energies to the Scout movement, and was rumoured to have been considered at one point as a potential Chief Scout. His wife was a qualified nurse, and was as active a member of the school staff until her early death in 1953.

The school at this time was drawn from all over England: choristers travelled to London from Lincolnshire, Yorkshire, even Northumberland. They saw little of their parents: Saturday 'exeats' every six weeks, staying in school through the twelve days of Christmas and through Easter, and with part of the six weeks in summer taken up with the scout camp in Dorset. (The choir school constituted the 30th Westminster troop, with a scout room in a basement store room. The wilderness in the back garden of Lambeth Palace was where we all learned to whittle wood and light fires.) We all had to write home once a week. Richard Watts has discovered an early letter home which began 'Dear Mummy and Daddy, I am writing home because I have to'; Malcolm Elliott similarly wrote in his first term 'I have made a number of new friends, but I don't like them very much'. One welcome entertainment was the film shown on many Saturday evenings, in the double classroom on the main floor; I think I saw all the Ealing comedies while a chorister.

Looking back, it was extraordinary how free from anxieties about strangers and harassment the boys were: travelling from home on their own, roaming around Dean's Yard and the Abbey precincts freely, taking their cameras out to photograph visiting dignitaries and their carriages. I do remember, though, Edward Pine giving us a very firm talk one day, on the steps of Church House, about not talking to strangers, which at the time I thought absurd; there must have been some incident of which I was unaware. But London was much emptier then, with barely a scattering of tourists; on Sunday mornings after the service we would walk a long way, supervised in crocodile, past the bomb sites towards the city. London was also very dirty, from millions of coal fires. Weather conditions could trap smoke in the Thames valley, creating choking 'smog': I remember waking early one morning, and looking at a dawn sky that looked more green than yellow and blue.

Monty was a frequent, and welcome, presence. Robert Turner, who stayed on at the school from the wartime choir, remembers him in his role as Colonel in Chief of the Army Catering Corps, arriving with cakes when such things were tightly rationed. I remember him arriving from Switzerland, with a large cardboard box full of Tobler chocolates, unknown delicacies to share among us. He would take two senior boys to the Royal Tournament each year, in his special Rolls Royce with its inward-sloping windscreen. His son later said of him, ruefully, that 'he was happiest in the presence of small boys': we saw him as a wonderful patron who showered us with presents. Rationing, after all, did not disappear until the early 1950s; our parents would pin our ration slips into the inside pockets of our jackets as we set off for London, and the matron would unpin them when we arrived.

William McKie was a perfectionist, with a temper to match: the boys in the postwar choir quickly learned how to avoid his anger, or to duck when a hymn book was thrown. He demanded high standards, and mostly got them from the boys – with assistance from Harry Barnes. It was more difficult with the Lay Vicars, who had security of tenure, and expected to be singing still when he had moved on: great characters, but not all great singers, though John Whitworth – who also rehearsed us from time to time – was one of the best counter-tenors of his generation, and once entertained us by giving an excellent imitation of Dame Clara Butt singing 'Land of Hope and Glory' at full power.

The Chapter also had security of tenure, surviving one dean after another. Jocelyn Perkins had been a minor canon since 1898; he was extremely deaf, and on one occasion ‘whispered’ in a voice that echoed round the nave, as we processed past him, ‘They look like little angels, don’t they? Well, I can tell you, they ain’t.’ One source of contention was our play space on the top floor, round which we would skate, run and shout in the evening, to the immense irritation of clergy living across the Yard; canon Hillyard in particular complained. I found the elderly Canon Donaldson charming, with a pocket full of sweets, although he was said to be dangerously left-wing, appointed when Ramsay MacDonald was Prime Minister. I put aside the book brought in to read during sermons to listen to Canon Marriott, whose sermons on the social message of the gospel brought the then Queen Mother, Queen Mary, to listen as well.

David Overton was turning the pages for Ossia Peasgood one day during the organ voluntary when a piece of stone fell 100 feet from the ceiling onto the organ casing. Damage to the Abbey from the war, when an incendiary had come through the lantern and fragments from a bomb in Old Palace Yard had holed parts of Henry VII’s chapel, had been worsened by air pollution – the stonework was black – and general dilapidation; so another appeal was launched, for £1m, to which Winston Churchill grandly gave the first £1.

Special occasions were fewer in the postwar years than in recent decades. The royal wedding in 1947, only months after the choir had returned to the school, was a grand occasion; the coronation in 1953 even more so. Choristers preparing for the coronation worked outside the routine of services while the Abbey was transformed, but sang in rehearsals to Vaughan Williams, Walton and Howells.

Here my recollection, and the earlier recollections of others on which I have drawn, run out. Younger former choristers have not yet written about their experience and their memories; I look forward to reading them as they do so. The choir has continued to improve under successive masters of the choristers; it has taken up again and expanded a programme of overseas tours, across Europe and North America, of which the most historic has been performing in the Vatican with the Sistine Choir. Special occasions have come more and more often, and joyous and sad royal events. The lay vicars now retire at sixty, and are a disciplined and highly-skilled group. The choir school has been through a number of ups and downs. One of the high points the complete refurbishment of 1994-6, which brought in curtains and soft colours, restored partitions and private spaces in the dormitories, and introduced a science room and another for languages. One of the low points came in the early 2000s, when the dean and the master of the choristers fell out and parents’ complaints about some aspects of school discipline leaked to the press.

The Abbey Choir School is now the only school in England that is entirely devoted to the education of choristers in a boarding environment: small numbers, in the middle of a world city, offered intensive education in small classes and the chance to develop their musical skills. Issues of security and safeguarding have become prominent in our anonymous urban societies, with thousands of tourists swirling through the Abbey every day; choirs and churches are not immune from such risks.

The choir school has adapted to the changing expectations of parents by engaging them more closely in the life of the school, and by being far more permissive about holidays and short leave. Fewer parents are now willing to say goodbye to their children at eight or nine; its future strength, and ability still to recruit from a wide pool of talent, depends on persuading potential parents to release their young for most of the year, to concentrate on a full music programme as well as on schooling. It’s also unavoidably expensive, though supported by the Abbey’s growing tourist income stream. In a society which has experienced a revolution in the role of women, it is open only to boys

– though cathedral choirs around the country are moving towards parallel or mixed children’s choirs; and it is impossible to imagine a school of this size adapting to more than one sex. So there are many challenges for the next 100 years. But the Abbey has successfully adapted to radical social change over the past century, and will no doubt continue to adapt. The choir in the second decade of the 21st century is singing new music and old in beautiful services and performances, of top quality. We must hope that it will retain the current qualities of musical excellence and good education, as it adapts to future challenges.

Re-opening of School, 1947: reconstituting the choir (half from wartime, half new)

Regaining the building (ATS during war) Monty's role. Furniture: iron bedsteads in open dormitories

Rationing, and sweet rationing (pinned inside pockets)

Monty's visits: cake, and then chocolates. His car: and the Royal Tournament

'Monty was at his happiest when in the presence of small boys' – his son. I got into trouble when quoting this in the Lords...

Time in school; parental visits, and holidays. How far away many of us then came from: York, Barnsley, etc.. Time away from home: 12 days of Christmas, through Easter. For those of us whose parents lived a long way from London (my visits to the Ransom's vicarage in Essex)

London after the war: Sunday morning walks, in crocodile

We called each other by our last names?

Exercise: Vincent Square (when released from barrage balloons); Lambeth Palace; a grubby and bare Dean's Yard.

Scouting: 30th Westminster. Summer camps in Dorset

School plays, every two years? Merchant of Venice, Midsummer Night's Dream, Tempest. (I played Titania, and then Caliban...)

Entertainment: Ealing comedies on Saturday evenings. (Film projector bought from money earned from special services, Robert Turner tells us)

Letters home: compulsory each week! 'Dear Mum, I'm writing to you because I have to...' 'Dear Mum and Dad, I have made some new friends, but I don't like any of them...'

The great smogs in London

The great occasions: the Royal Wedding, 1947, soon after Choir School was reopened.
Festival of Britain. Coronation. Vaughan Williams; Walton

Relations with St.Paul's; and Westminster Cathedral - and Westminster School

The astonishing lack of security: travelling to school, and home (and Edward Pine's sudden lecture)
Robert Turner on Royal Wedding: dashing in and out to take pictures

Personalities: William Mackie. Mingan Thompson (and Peggy Thompson, who died aged 39 in 1954). Edward Pine. Ossie Peasgood. Harry Barnes (choirboy 1922-8; sang tenor solo at Royal Wedding, 1947; rehearsed choir for 30 years?)

The lay vicars: Whitworth, Barnes, Henderson, Tudor etc. Security of tenure

The Dean and Chapter: Alan Don, Canon Marriott, Lewis Donaldson, Canon Smyth; Dams, Hillyard, Jocelyn Perkins (looking back, most of them seemed very old – now the minor canons look very young)

Quality of education? Latin, history, maths – but today's science room looks wonderful.

1960s and beyond: special occasions, royal weddings: Margaret 1960, Anne 1973; Andrew 1986; funerals, Earl Mountbatten 1979...

McKie retired 1963: Douglas Guest until 1981; Simon Preston, then Martin Neary until 1998; James O'Donnell

Headmaster: Overend, 1997 – now Jonathan Milton

1994: the Choir School refurbished. Summer and autumn terms living in Leicester Court Hotel, Kensington, with London bus to ferry them back and forth. Lunches at Westminster School, classes in Central Hall. £1m cost – but it was worth it!

Foreign tours:, increasingly frequent - I know of Paris and Isel de France, 1983, including High Mass in Notre Dame; and again, Versailles in 1984. 1987 North America for some weeks – junior boys kept services going. 1990, Switzerland and Hungary; 1995, Germany; 1997 North America again. Most recent, to USA in 2014.

Social change since 1980s: more time for parents, a friendlier school building, a more rigorous syllabus.

The next 100 years?