



# Exeter Cathedral Old Choristers' Association

## *Newsletter* *February 2024*



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Dear Members,

Welcome to the ECOCA Newsletter of February 2024. This year marks the diamond jubilee of our Association, which we will celebrate at our annual reunion on Easter Monday.

This edition features news of the works in the Cloister Gallery and the Quire Floor, which is being led by Kit Reynolds, an alumnus of Exeter Cathedral School.

It also features the second half of the memories of Dr Mike Dobson following his retirement from the choir after 47 years service in July 2023.

As always, I would be very happy to receive any news or contributions for future editions. Please feel free to contact me at anytime with your news or ideas:

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# ECOCA Diamond Jubilee

## Rev Charles Roberts



2024 marks the Diamond Jubilee of Exeter Cathedral Old Choristers' Association, 60 years since the association was founded. 1964 was the defining moment when an idea bore fruition, and a group of former choristers came together to celebrate an extraordinary musical education at the Choir School and to renew friendships made along the way. I wonder whether those founding members expected us to be celebrating the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary now in 2024!

I remember (vaguely!) my first reunion. It was just four years after the inaugural meeting, in 1968, and I was just shy of my 15th birthday. I imagine my school uniform still fitted me so I turned out in the ubiquitous grey flannel two piece suit to join a lot of 'grown-ups'. I don't remember much about Evensong, but I do remember the dinner!



Cathedral Choir procession 1965

As was the trend back in the 1960s the restaurant of choice had very dim lighting, a kind of red/orange glow pervading the room where it was a strain to see what was on the plate! It was all very formal as you might expect, but the point is, the reunion was happening and has continued right up to the present.



Cathedral Choir  
in July 1978

So what are we and what does this anniversary represent? If you google ECOCA you will variously come up with a solar powered cooker (yes, really!) Eton's College Chapel Choir, the Ely Centre of Contemporary Art, as well as manufacturers of castanets, lathes and many other wonderful items!

I think we are more useful than many of those. Our objectives are clear. We exist in order to meet together and worship together, to renew our friendships and exchange news, to support Chorister education, to foster relationships with the school Head and staff and the Cathedral clergy and music department, and to administer our Bursary Fund.

Cathedral Choir  
tour to Italy  
1988







Choristers at  
the High Alter  
with candles in  
1990

Key to the success of the association are the relationships we forge and our love of the place that impacted our lives so deeply. Of course without the hospitality and encouragement of the Cathedral and School none of this would be possible, but even so we come back each year because we want to, and that says something very profound. It would be easy to become a cosy huddle, but we are more than that. What strikes me about those aims is that I believe over the years we have kept every one of them alive.

Our flagship enterprise, the Bursary Fund, has grown from a relatively modest engagement with members making their contributions, to a huge resource that pays out some £22,000 per year to chorister families in need of support.



Cathedral Choir at  
St Paul's Cathedral  
in 2008



Choristers at  
High Alter in  
2014

The generosity of members and a wonderful legacy have made this possible, and we should be rightly proud of that achievement. Such things allow us to claim that our association is one of the largest and most active in the country.

60 years – many of us have lived through the formation, development and ongoing operation of the association. Will we be here in another 60 years? I do hope so. In the meantime we have good reason to celebrate, to give thanks and sing God's praises for 60 wonderful years! Happy Anniversary ECOCA!!



# Choir Tour

## James Mustard, Canon Precentor



On 11th-17th July the Cathedral Choir set off on a tour of Wales and Ireland. Twenty-two choristers, twelve adult singers, two organists, a Director of Music, two canons, a headmaster and chorister tutor boarded a large bus for the round trip of 818 miles.

Our first stop was the Oakwood Theme Park, where choristers availed themselves of an almost empty park to go on MANY roller-coaster rides! Then to St David's Cathedral in Pembrokeshire, where the party stayed at the St David's Bunk Barns. We enjoyed fantastic hospitality there, and the large fields hosted many games and not a few lost frisbees! After a morning playing cricket on the broad beach of Whitesands Bay, the concert at St David's Cathedral was well attended, part of the cathedral's summer music series. It was a joy for members of the group to catch up with former Exeter Cathedral organist Laurence John and Virger Morgan Philpott, both now working at that cathedral.



The choristers at St David's Cathedral



On 13 July, the group boarded the ferry for Ireland. A welcome surprise as we boarded was the announcement that it was the final crossing of our vessel, the Stena Europe. So, for the duration of the crossing, there was an endless supply of iced cupcakes, free champagne and no charges at the bars, as "everything must go". Needless to say, we embraced this generosity with zeal!



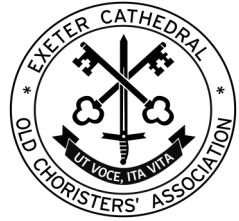
It was fortunate that this had been offered, as our arrival at Rosslare was delayed by one hour, meaning a very swift turnaround in Wexford for our concert at 8pm in the fine Georgian church of St Iberius. This was shared with chorister parent and Wexford native, Eamonn Mulhall, who sang operatic arias accompanied by our guest organist, James McVinnie.

After that concert, the adults stayed in Wexford, while the choristers continued on to the youth hostel at Glendalough, Co. Wicklow. The next morning, however, driving rain forced a change of plan and, to cheers from the choristers, it was announced that, instead of a bracing walk, we would be heading to the cinema to watch the latest Indiana Jones film. From the cinema, we headed to Dublin, where, the choristers enjoyed a meal at Captain America's Burger Bar.





The next day they donned Viking hats for a driving and aquatic tour of the city, while the adults went to the Jameson Whisky museum. Then to St Patrick's Church of Ireland Cathedral, for rehearsal, a fine meal, and concert. There were many friends and supporters in the audience.



On Sunday 16th July, we sang two services at Christ Church, Church of Ireland, Cathedral, with a quick dash to the shops by choristers in between. After a rousing Choral Evensong (with perhaps the loudest performance of Howells St Paul's Service many of us had ever heard!) the Dean's Vicar hosted a fine reception for the choir and its supporters, among them many chorister families. Then, to an excellent end of tour meal at a local Italian restaurant, and for the choristers an early night, and for many of the adults an opportunity to catch up with each other and local musicians. Then, an early start for the ferry from Dublin to Holyhead, and a long drive back to Exeter.

It was super for the choir to be touring again - its last tour was in April 2018. Our huge thanks go to our host venues, who made us so very welcome, to our Director of Music and the Headmaster and Chorister Tutor of Exeter Cathedral School.

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# Choir News

*First published in Cathedral News October 2023 — No. 736*



At Evensong on 10th September, Michael Stephens-Jones and Giles Longstaff were installed as Assistant Director of Music and Organ Scholar respectively. They were photographed after the service, appropriately in the organ loft.

Michael, on the right of the photo, writes:

“Hello, I'm Michael the new Assistant Director of Music, and I'm really excited to get started here at the Cathedral. I hail from Hertfordshire originally, and have previously worked and studied in Tewkesbury, Cambridge, Guildford, and London, where I've just finished a very enjoyable year at St Paul's Cathedral. Although the South West is completely new to me, I'm very grateful for the warm welcome that I have received from everyone I've met so far, and am very much looking forward to getting to know this beautiful area and the Cathedral community.”

In the same service, Alice Risdon-Osborne was installed as a Lay Vicar. Here she is, and behind her (from right to left) are Jason Cobb, Adam Warne, and Benjamin Irvine-Capel, our new Choral Scholars.



The newly invested Senior Choristers celebrated with cake!



# Timothy Parsons



Wells Cathedral has announced that Timothy Parsons has been appointed as its next Director of Music and will take up the post on 1st September 2024.

Timothy is currently Director of Music at St Edmundsbury Cathedral, a position he has held since April 2021.

Prior to this appointment Timothy was Assistant Director of Music at Exeter Cathedral from September 2016. Timothy has also been Interim Musical Director for Bury Bach Choir, including directing a performance of Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana* at the Bury Apex in March 2023.

Timothy comments:

"I am thrilled to have been appointed Director of Music at Wells Cathedral. It will be a privilege to lead its world-famous musical tradition for the next stage of its history. Cressida and I are greatly looking forward to our move to Wells and to becoming part of the life of the Cathedral in September."



# Cathedral Works

## 2020s Development Appeal Project Team



Our Cloister Gallery building is taking shape and there is an opportunity for you to be part of this 'history in the making'. Gordon Pike, ever the intrepid fundraiser, at the very start of the building work suggested an appeal to create a 'musician's window' in the new Gallery.

The window we identified is at the top of the stairs nearest the Brewer door. Talking to Gordon at the time we thought it sounded rather lovely to give this part of the Development Appeal an appropriate title so if you wish to join in to Gordon's initiative you will be contributing to the *Punctators Emeritus appeal*.



The first phase of our exciting project began in November 2022 in the Cloister Garden, where specialist building teams began a two-year project to recreate a new Cloister Gallery making the Cathedral a better place for community gatherings, events and more.

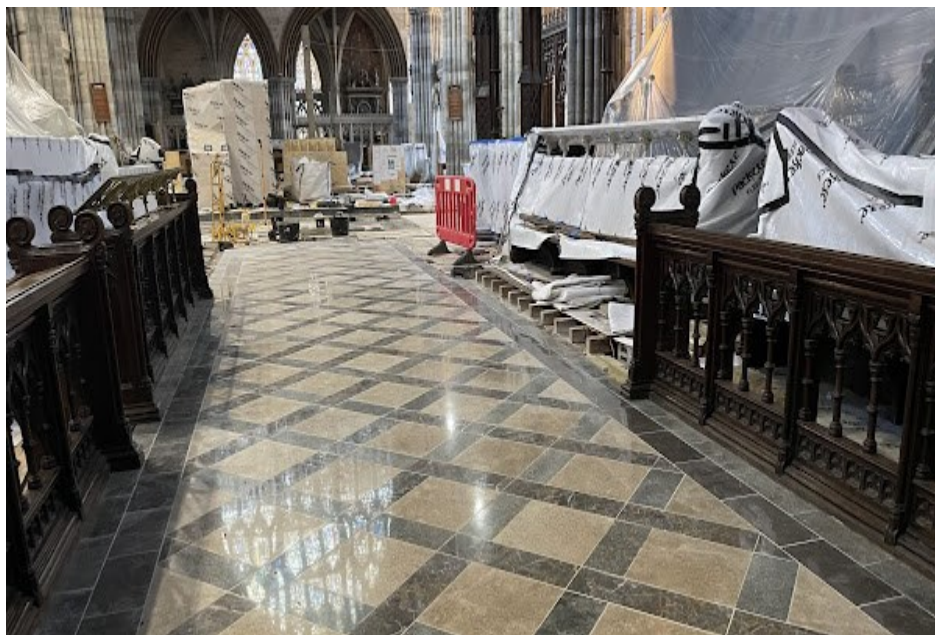
The new construction is being built on the foundations of the Cathedral's original medieval cloisters, which were demolished in the mid-17th century.

When completed, the Cloister Gallery will recreate a covered walkway to connect the Cathedral with its 13th century Chapter House and Pearson Building, where a new Treasures Exhibition space will safely display ancient collections from the Cathedral's Library and Archives for everyone to enjoy.



The Pearson Building will also be used to house a new Cathedral Shop, as well as improving accessibility with lifts and new toilet facilities.

A second phase of the project began in April 2023 to replace the Quire floor including a more efficient underfloor heating system, helping to reduce our carbon footprint. The new Jubilee Pavement is made from locally-sourced Devon stone. The design is based on the work of 19th century architect Sir George Gilbert Scott who designed much of Quire, including the wooden stalls and the original floor that was replaced in the 1960s.



Choir floor based on design of Sir George Gilbert Scott



A further phase of the project will see work carried out in the Cathedral's East End, including the Quire Aisles. This phase delivers a more sustainable

heating system, replaces the lighting and sound system together with new visitor interpretation to explain the history of the Cathedral to people of all ages and backgrounds.

As well as supporting improvements and essential conservation work, funds raised by the 2020s Development Appeal aims to support a calendar of community activities and events, all designed make the ancient Devon landmark more inclusive, accessible and sustainable for the future.

By adopting a stone you can chose for your donation to support either the music or the capital aspect of the project. In return we will send you a certificate commemorating this special year when the Gallery will be open, together with a red lapel badge of the Great West Window and enter your name and short dedication into our memorial book of donors to be kept in the archives. If you would like to learn more please email [jill.taylor@exeter-cathedral.org.uk](mailto:jill.taylor@exeter-cathedral.org.uk) or ring 07490 009865. You can find out more at <https://www.exeter-cathedral.org.uk/support-us/adopt-a-stone/>.

# Mike Dobson Memories

## (Part 2)



During my time the choir has sung for many members of the Royal family, some of them more than once, but sadly not for the Queen Mother or Princess Diana. This included the amazing Maundy Service in 1982, when we were each paid the official fee of a set of Maundy money. We sometimes talked to the royal visitors after services. On one such occasion in 1987, and relating to the Music Foundation for which the then Prince Charles was patron, his visit to the vestry included the questions: "Do you have any altos? Are they the ones with the pained expressions on their faces?" There was much laughter, but curiously no-one disagreed with him! He then asked me if the boys were well-behaved. I even have a photo of that conversation taking place!





I was involved in numerous choir recordings. These started with LPs, then as technology developed, cassettes and CDs. Many of the early ones were made by Harry Mudd of Abbey Label; curiously for a record producer, he was deaf in one ear.



Most of these can be listened to on the ECOCA website: <http://www.ecoca.org/recordings.html> Amusingly, or is it curiously, I have never actually listened to many of these; some are even still sealed in their plastic wrappers!

There have been numerous BBC choral evensongs (also available on the ECOCA website.) It was interesting to see how these sessions changed over the years. They started with several vans outside the cathedral, many cables, a telephone then satellite connection to London and in wonderful BBC old-style convention, all the staff wore suits. The number of vans steadily reduced, until recently when there was just a car, an internet link and fewer cables; but the wonderful large brass microphone bases are still used. Suits are sadly less in evidence now. It is also lovely to see that the current BBC choral evensong producer is Ben Collingwood, a former Exeter bass choral scholar.

There were several TV recordings over the years, as well as numerous small news items. As with the radio, the amount of equipment and staff for these has steadily decreased to become very small, a news item sometimes now just being one person with a camera and doing everything. One TV session was in a Plymouth studio, where we were interviewed by Prebendary Parkinson, who was the media link person for the cathedral.

Does anyone remember his infamous sermon in the cathedral one Sunday afternoon? Until about 1990, all prebendaries had to preach twice a year in the cathedral at Sunday evensong. The prebendary declared at one point that his "village was full of living orgasms". He foolishly tried to correct this to what it should have been (organisms); this only made the laughter worse. One tenor even had to stuff his surplus into his mouth to prevent his laughter being audible.

Back in the vestry, John Thurmer (Chancellor) turned and said to the prebendary, "you live in a very interesting village, prebendary". More laughter and a further red-faced preb.

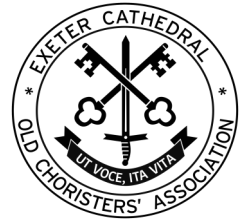


Readers may recall some of the other characters from the congregation that raised a smile over the years: Captain Kettle, Oddsocks, The Polish Baron (a very tall man, on regular day-leave from Digby Hospital, who always sat opposite the Bishop's Throne). There was Graham (of loud and late "Amen!!!" fame) and Prof. Walter Minchinton (with his unofficial 'reserved' stall at the back of Cantoris quire stalls for the Sunday morning Eucharist.) He even came up to Phil Hobbs to talk to him in the middle of a concert in Dawlish parish church – Lucian Nethsingha was furious and uttered unprintable things afterwards!

There was the gentleman who always attended Matins in very sombre attire and drove a really old, huge car - he also insisted on continuing to sit in the nave for Sunday Matins after that service had been moved into the quire in the early 1980s due to reduced congregation numbers. The Eucharist was conversely moved into the nave at the same time, due to increased numbers.

Who remembers Father Venn? He was a retired clergyman and Priest Vicar of the cathedral who regularly attended on Sundays. Julian Sutton (bass lay vicar and punctator) provided car lifts to and from Father Venn's house. In return, Julian was provided with a lovely Sunday lunch in the White Hart. The consequence was several red-wine 'blurred' evensongs for Julian. Does anyone remember Father Venn's quick exit during one evensong? We returned to the vestry to see a trail of his vestments across the vestry floor, as he had cast them off as quickly as possible to reach the toilet unencumbered.

Father Venn also enters the story of the Exeter scarlet cassocks. During the mid-1980s, as a consequence of the Queen commenting during a Maundy Service at Ripon about whether that choir was entitled to wear the scarlet of royal cathedral foundations, the Master of the Wardrobe (the then Bishop of Wells) sent a letter via the Lord Chancellor's office to all cathedrals questioning their right to wear scarlet cassocks. I was living in a flat in the Deanery (now the Old Deanery) at the time. My flat was the block on the north side that looks like two aisles of a chapel (I wrote most of my PhD thesis on a desk at the back of the part that was still actually a chapel!) I picked up the letter, with its grand seal on the envelope, when it was delivered unceremoniously with the post to the Deanery back door. I gave it to the Dean (Richard Eyre). He looked puzzled but did not realise what a turmoil would follow as a consequence.



Mike Dobson in his blood red cassock

Cutting a long story short, the cathedral was unable to definitively prove that it was a royal foundation and so would have to cease wearing scarlet cassocks. During the debate, it was mentioned to Father Venn that he would have to cease this practice as well. It turned out, though, that he was the only person of the cathedral clergy actually entitled to wear scarlet, as he had been a Queen's Chaplain. No one realised this!



The outcome of the whole episode was that it was agreed the cassocks could be blood red. The Dean had proposed this colour on the basis that it was the colour associated with St Peter. Thankfully, the choir were allowed to keep the scarlet, as their cassocks had only relatively recently been replaced (the heavy woollen ones that I started with, were replaced by synthetic fabric ones during the academic year 1977-78). This was on the understanding that they too would become blood-red when they needed replacing, which was not until about 2018!

It is not only what we wore on the outside that changed over time. When I started there was quite a strict dress code for the adults. White shirts, ties, black shoes and suits on Sundays, for concerts and important occasions. Weekdays could be more casual, but definitely no jeans, brightly coloured trousers, shorts or sandals. I was once asked to role up some green trousers so that they did not show below my cassock. But then one hot summer, John Thurmer (Chancellor) said he was wearing shorts under his cassock. The flood gates opened. We could then wear shorts too.

Apparently, I was famous among some choristers for my shorts! I and some others even strayed into the dizzy extreme of wearing sandals for a while, but 'sensible' casual shoes became the norm for weekdays; no trainers or brightly coloured shoes allowed though. The formal 'Sunday attire' generally remains, an excellent piece of tradition, but otherwise things have understandably relaxed as fashion became more informal.



White shirts are even less a requirement, as we have worn white neck scarves since the cassocks were changed a few years ago, and so any shirts are covered and we all look the same. Shorts are common. Even the current Director of Music wears them occasionally! Footwear was standardised relatively recently to black shoes, for all services, by Dean Jonathan Draper. The result is a wonderful array of black shoes stored in the vestry for changing into before services!



Mike's  
farewell  
photo

The nature of choir conducting has also changed over the years. For quite a while the Director of Music only conducted at weekends because the assistant organist (Paul Morgan) and he were both in the cathedral at the same time. The title of this role changed over the years, from 'Organist and Master of the Choristers', through 'The Organist' to the current 'Director of Music'. On Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays, 'conducting' was by an adult beater on each side, one of which would be the punctator, as there would only be one organist in the cathedral those days. Wednesday was no choir unless it was a Saint's Day or eve of Saint's Day, or other important festival such as Ash Wednesday. Friday was conducted by the Director of Music as the service was unaccompanied. Documents in the cathedral archive suggest the office of punctator started in the late-nineteenth century, and there used to be two punctators up to the mid-twentieth century, one on each side.

This changed when Paul Morgan was able to be in the cathedral for all services due to the Music Department closing at the university, where Paul lectured part-time. The Director of Music could conduct Mondays and Tuesdays. Thursdays still used the beaters as the Director had Wednesdays and Thursdays off each week. This changed again from Andrew Millington's time, with Thursdays having both organists in the cathedral. Since Andrew, there has been little need for the beaters, as the assistant organists have always been full-time. From 1994 when the girl choristers started, the director of the girl choristers Stephen Tanner conducted on Mondays, which was the girls' evening, and then also at the other girls' services as they took on more.



How many of the 'older' former choristers remember the hinged kneelers in the quire stalls? How often were your toes caught underneath the wooden supports as the seniors brought the kneeler down and pinned your feet, with the full weight of the other choristers on the kneeler? The adults had the same type of hinged kneelers. I too remember the pain! Thankfully, after yet another tear-streaked treble's agony, these were removed in the early 2000s. As I pointed out to the then Precentor, they were a serious health and safety issue, with the potential for broken bones and the cathedral being legally liable.

One of the biggest changes in the history of the choir that I witnessed was the introduction of girl choristers in 1994. The first the back row knew about this was an article in The Guardian newspaper! At the time, there was so much debate about this introduction, now thankfully largely committed to history. Someone even said to me at the time that of course the girls will never sing in 'important' services! An astounding comment!! Personally, I think it was an excellent development and the cathedral and music-making have benefitted enormously. It has been wonderful to see how the girls have steadily increased the number of times they sing and now the boys and girls have an equal, shared role providing the top line. Also personally, it meant that my daughter Ginevra could sing in the choir, which she did until last year, and has provided her and many other girls with an excellent foundation to go on to professional singing careers.



Needless to say I have some favourite pieces: these include anything by Purcell or Gibbons,

Bairstow *Blessed City*, Howells *St Paul's* and *Gloucester*, Bruckner *Locus Iste* and *Os Justi*, Croft *God is Gone Up*, Vaughan Williams *Mass in G Minor*, Requiems by Fauré and Duruflé, Wesley *Ascribe* and *Wilderness*, Duruflé *Ubi Caritas*, the list goes on... even

some organ items: Howells *Master Tallis Testament*, Alain *Litanies*, Liszt *Prelude and Fugue on BACH*.



How would I sum up the past 47 years? A wonderful privilege to belong to a very special club. Life-long friendships and god-parents for my children. Seeing and hearing Ginevra and Freddie develop as choristers in front of me (Freddie still has another two years) feeling so proud of them talking to Charles and Camilla when they visited the cathedral in the summer of 2021, and regularly receiving their criticism of my efforts in the car on the way home! Perhaps the Dobson presence and another rendition of *Record of John* may one day return at the end of the Decani stalls through them?



Top photo: Mike and his children.

Bottom photo: Mike meeting HRH King Charles III in 2009.

