

# ***ECOCA Newsletter***

***February 2023***



Exeter  
Cathedral

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Dear Members,

Welcome to the ECOCA Newsletter of February 2023. It is a relief to be back in the tradition of our annual Easter Monday reunions following the interruption of the pandemic.

We had a memorable reunion last year celebrating the long contribution of Mr Pike to the life of Exeter Cathedral, more on which to follow.

This edition also features some memories of Dr Mike Dobson, who is retiring from the choir after 47 years service in July 2023.

We are approaching the diamond jubilee of our Association, so there will be much to celebrate in our annual reunion of 2024.

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 Reunion 2022

## Gordon Pike



This year Easter Monday was on 18<sup>th</sup> April and because covid had been so disruptive and cancelled the reunions in 2020 and 2021, my farewell by the Old Choristers had not happened. However, on our Easter Monday reunion fifty Old Choristers had gathered by 10.30am to rehearse the mass setting of Franz Schubert in G and the

communion motet *Ave Verum* by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. The Epistle was read by Johnny Titchin and the Intercessions were led by Canon John Pedlar, one of our more senior members of the Association, who was a chorister from 1952-1956.

As always lunch at the school was a splendid affair where the Head, James Featherstone, welcomed us to share lunch with the present-day choristers after a glass of sparkling wine in his office. Forty of us went to lunch and some of us were nearly late for the afternoon rehearsal having enjoyed a great feast.

Arriving back in the Quire for the afternoon rehearsal I could see that the numbers had swollen to just over a hundred singers. It was true that some of these people were my former choral scholars, Cantoris Tenor 2. They were Kit Perona Wright, Richard Brain, Jason Bamford, Daniel Maw, Gavin Hyman, Jonny Wood and my Lay Vicar Nicholas Sherwood, who I sang with when I was a choral scholar in 1974. I joined them and we sang in the back row behind Cantoris as always.

Mr Noon took control of quite a noisy group of singers who seemed to want to talk when they were not singing and slowly knocked us all into shape.

I must thank Mr Noon for letting me choose the music for the Eucharist and Evensong and adding an Introit *Locus Iste* by Anton Bruckner and an extra anthem, *The Strife in O'er, the Battle Done* by Richard Shephard (1949-2021).



This anthem was commissioned by Geoffrey Mitchell, a distinguished member of our Old Choristers Association. He was in fact a chorister at Exeter from 1944-1950 and then returned as a committee member for too many years to remember and has represented us for many years on the Federation of Cathedral Old Choristers Association. This anthem was first performed at our Silver Jubilee Celebration of ECOCA on Easter Monday 1989 by our cathedral choir.

By the time we got to Evensong the Quire was nearly full, even with all the extra seats the virggers had added near the High Altar. The Dean welcomed us all at the beginning of the service after the Introit and the Preces and Responses and then everyone sang the hymn '*The Day of Resurrection*'. Personally, I thought this was very appropriate because to me it was true after two years of very unpleasant covid we had managed to rise above it and continue to sing to the glory of God in a wonderful building.

The music for Evensong was Harwood in *A Flat* and *Blessed be the God and Father* by Samuel Sebastian Wesley. As I am sure most people know I was asked to sing the tenor solo in the Magnificat of Harwood in A flat and it did mean that I had sung it for the hundredth time. I have to say the organist James Anderson-Besant, Assistant Director of Music, accompanied as one would expect superbly but also managed to get a record of it on Facebook which seems to have travelled far and wide. Thank you James – it has created quite a stir amongst many of my friends all around the British Isles and even further afield.

The rest of Evensong seemed to fly by as a well-oiled machine in the capable hands of the Director of Music, Timothy Noon.

Once again Mr Noon – thank you very much for letting me have such a wonderful service to mark my retirement from the Cathedral Choir after over fifty years of singing, boy and man, 1963-1967 and 1974-2020.



At the end of Evensong there were so many people to talk to but I had to move to the Chapter House for tea and the presentation to me from the Old Choristers Association. I have to say our chairman kept everything moving so that the rest of the day did not run behind schedule. As always a merry band of pressganged volunteers provided the tea and everyone enjoyed it. As always I cannot do Easter Monday without a cream scone. Thank you to all who contributed towards my farewell gift of well over £1000. The first thing I bought was a Citizen Eco-Drive wrist watch and then the rest was spent during Penny's and my 5 week trip to New Zealand since Christmas. It was great to be able to treat ourselves to some mementos which will remind us of a wonderful trip exploring new lands and making contact with family and friends who live so far away.

The older members of the Association may be interested to know I met Donald Rutter's wife Sue while we were in Christ Church, South Island, NZ. Donald Rutter was a chorister at Exeter from 1942-1948. He joined the committee in the late sixties and for a time before he emigrated to New Zealand with Sue in 1995, he was the Secretary of the Association. Unfortunately Donald passed away last year but Sue lives in Rangiora, North of Christ Church. We had two wonderful days of sight seeing and reminiscing.

I was allowed to arrive late to the Pearson room for the AGM but managed to arrive before it was time for my Treasurer's report. As far as I remember we voted on Alexander Stevens to the committee and all the rest of the committee were prepared to continue for another year.

Again, this year the Mercure Southgate Hotel in Southernhay was the venue for the dinner. We had seventy-six people signed up for the dinner and the guest speaker was Simon Toyne, a former chorister (1977-1983) and an extra special guest was Andrew Nethsingha also a former chorister (1976-1981) who was invited to mark the memory of his father Lucian Nethsingha who passed away in February 2021 having been Organist and Master of the Choristers at Exeter from 1973 to 1999.



The dinner seemed to run very smoothly in the capable hands of our President, the Dean Reverend Jonathan Greener with our Chairman keeping a watchful eye. The raffle seemed to go very well raising £340 and Simon Toyne was very clever to include all the events over the last two years in his speech which needed mentioning and still be able to make it enjoyable to listen to. Well done, Simon! I am very proud to be able to say you were a former pupil of mine who I had taught when you attended Exeter Cathedral School.

I hope this report gives you some idea of what happens at Exeter Cathedral every Easter Monday every year barring pandemics, and reaches all the old choristers who are not able to make it on the day.

# A Personal Note from Gordon



The farewell from the Old Choristers was absolutely unbelievable. A day never to forget. Thank you for making it such a wonderful day and the collection was so generous. Thank you one and all for whatever you did to make it such a memorable occasion.

## ... And a Prayer from the Dean

The whole day was memorable and enjoyable, as was the Grace before dinner, written specially for the occasion by the Dean:

We bid so-long to Gordon Pike

We miss his singing, and his beard:

For many here, quite Father-like,

His doesn't shave – he has it sheared.

A chap we've all admired. We know he's earned his rest.

For 50 years he's sung us proud,

But most we miss his constancy

Always here... always loud.

Looking out for you and me. Now happily retired.

We've all been hugely blessed.

We're grateful, God, for all he's done

To make this annual feast such fun.

For Gordon, then, three cheers.

Bless us tonight and bless our food

And fill our hearts with gratitude

For so many happy years. Amen.



# ECOCA Member News



New members of ECOCA this year:

Jack Arnold. 2016-2022  
Summer Bindley Carr. 2018-2022  
Ginevra Dobson. 2017-2022  
Phoebe Gelis. 2018-2022  
Rosalilia Gibbons. 2018-2022  
Johnny Griggs. 2018-2022  
Martha Herniman. 2019-2022  
Jazmin Kristo-Nagy. 2018-2022  
Dominic Mirfin. 2019-2022

Associate Member – Kit Arnold at School 1985-1990

Associate Member - Reverend Steve Martin (Choral Scholar)

## In Memoriam

A Service of Evensong giving thanks for the life of Simon Barwood was held in Winchester Cathedral at 5.30pm on Saturday 24th September 2022.



Simon, pictured here in his Exeter days, was a member of the Cathedral Choir at Exeter from 1986-1991. In 1997, he was appointed as a lay clerk at Winchester Cathedral, where he later became Media and Communications Officer. He died in July 2020 during lockdown, when numbers attending funerals were limited.



# Cathedral News

Exeter Cathedral's most significant building project since 1887 has begun with the first phase of an ambitious new development.



Work began in November 2022 in the cathedral's Cloister Garden, where a specialist building team are recreating a new Cloister Gallery. The new construction replaces original medieval cloisters, which were demolished in 1657, and recreates a covered walkway to connect the cathedral with its 13th century Chapter House and Pearson Building. It will be the first major construction to be added to the cathedral since the Pearson building was completed in the late 19th century. The most recent additions prior to the Pearson building were the cathedral's Speke and Oldham chapels, built 500 years ago.



Other development works taking place in the Cloister Garden include the preparation of a Treasures Exhibition space which will safely showcase ancient collections from the cathedral's library and archive. New toilet facilities with improved accessibility will also be installed as part of the project.

The first phase of the project is expected to take two years to complete, but for The Revd Canon Chris Palmer, Exeter Cathedral's Canon Treasurer, who is overseeing the project, the benefits far outweigh the inevitable disruption:



"We are delighted to have reached the point of starting this exciting project. We know we are going to have to live with inconvenience for a while, but we are really looking forward to the day when our new facilities greatly improve the experience of all our visitors and worshippers."



Further phases of the project would see approximately half of the Grade I listed heritage site conserved and refurbished. Works include conservation of the cathedral's 50 medieval misericords (or 'mercy seats').

Work will also be completed on a more sustainable heating zoning system, new visitor interpretation to explain the history of the cathedral, a new Cathedral Shop, and lifts to make the new facilities and visitor experience accessible for everyone.

The work is being funded by Exeter Cathedral's 2020s Development Appeal which aims to raise £10 million. The funds will support essential improvements and a calendar of community activities and events designed make the ancient cathedral more inclusive, accessible and sustainable for the future.

# Cathedral School News

## New Director of Music



Exeter Cathedral School has appointed Mr Russell Collins as Director of Music from April 2022. Having joined ECS in September 2021, Russell was excited to be taking on the leadership of the School's flagship Music Department:

"I am absolutely delighted to be appointed as Director of Music at ECS, a school with a proud history of musical excellence. I am looking forward to being a champion for our impeccable music tradition whilst offering diverse and fulfilling musical experiences to all the children at ECS."

Head, James Featherstone, said:



"Music and performance matter very much at our School, and the DoM job here is an important gig. Russell is an exceptional musician, director and teacher: his high standards in the classroom, passion for inclusive music-making, experience as a high-level performer, and his infectious sense of warmth and fun make him ideally suited to pick up the baton in April."

Russell began playing drums, piano and saxophone at the age of six in his home city of Birmingham. He studied with jazz aficionados Dave Stokes, Graham Knock and the late Tony Richards.

He took all three instruments through to Grade 8 and played in the Sandwell Music Service ensembles. After school, he read music at Birmingham University specialising in performance. Whilst at Birmingham, his lessons were at The Royal Birmingham Conservatoire under Malcolm Garrett (Drum Kit) James Strebing (Percussion) and Anna Thompson-Brooks (Jazz Saxophone). After leaving full-time education Russell continued studies with Malcolm Garrett, Asaf Sirkis (Drums, Leeds College of Music/Trinity College of Music) and jazz piano lessons with internationally-acclaimed jazz pianist John Law.



A career in music education began with a two-year contract at Wells Cathedral School, where he was first immersed in the choral tradition and became familiar with the Choir School world. He began teaching drums, percussion and woodwind in schools around Bath, Somerset and Wiltshire, as well as setting up and running the Wells Jazz Collective, promoting and producing jazz concerts for touring professionals and performance opportunities for local jazz musicians. The Collective is still running to this day nearly twelve years later.

After his first stint in the West Country Russell moved back to Birmingham for performance commitments, and began teaching at Old Swinford Hospital School as well as for Dudley Performing Arts and the Priory School, Edgbaston.

As a busy professional Drummer/Percussionist/Pianist/Musical Director, Russell has worked with Symphony Orchestras, Chamber Ensembles, Choirs, Musical Theatre Groups, Rock Bands, Soul Bands, in Musical Theatre Pits, and with Contemporary Theatre Groups, Jazz Trios and Big Bands. He and his wife Maugan moved to Devon in August 2020 to bring up their two young sons Finn and Aiden. Once the lockdown restrictions eased Russell began establishing himself as a music educator and musician around Exeter and South Devon. He currently plays piano/drums for the Exeter Jazz Orchestra and can be found playing at The Bridge Jazz Club at The Phoenix most months.

# Mike Dobson Retires (Part 1)



"Could you write some memoirs of your time in the choir please, for the Newsletter? About a thousand words." That's a bit like trying to fit the 15th evening into two minutes. So, what follows is a bit like starting with verse one, a few changes of chant and then skipping to the Gloria. And just like we omit the really juicy verses when we sing psalms ... something for Easter Monday post-dinner, wine-fuelled conversations.



It all began in the autumn of 1976, when I started as an undergraduate at Exeter University, studying History and Archaeology, and became an alto choral scholar. I joined in the same term as Julian Sutton (bass lay vicar and later punctator) and John Turner (bass choral scholar and later secondary). But at long last, in July I will be hanging up my cassock for the final time; the last of the 1976 brigade.



As the saying goes: "I've seen them come, I've seen them go". For me this means (as accurately as I can remember) and resembling a version of the "Twelve Days of Christmas": three Directors of Music, five Assistant Directors, seven Deans, four Bishops, seven Precentors, six Treasurers, five Chancellors, four Succentors, seven Head Virgers, eight Headmasters and five Punctators. I have also witnessed two organ rebuilds, one new chamber organ, several grand pianos, two sets of song schools, two sets of nave stalls (the 1970s set are still for sale in a local antique centre!), two sets of quire stall lights (both equally badly designed and annoying) and probably the only period of interruption in the choir's singing since the Commonwealth (caused by Covid). I don't know how many choristers have passed through the stalls in front of me, but I guess it could be over 250. As for the number of lay vicars and choral scholars, I have no idea, but it will be a significant number. And so it comes to pass, but very sadly, it's now my turn to "see them go".



Another amusing statistic. The procession from the vestry to the quire stalls is about 100 metres. If to that is added other processions for Christmas, Easter, etc., it means I have processed for a distance longer than walking from Exeter to Edinburgh (i.e. over 450 miles!!). No wonder I have got through numerous pairs of black shoes over the years! As for the number of times I have sung a particular psalm, Mag & Nunc, anthem etc ... no idea. Some of them I can now even get right!

I still remember my audition with Lucian Nethsingha. It was in the old, stone-vaulted song school above the chapel on the north side of the quire. Many of you may remember that a particular stone in the vaulting near the door of the song-school used to crumble when we sang loudly or the trebles sang very high – the powder used to land on my copy; and as for a fire exit ... health and safety didn't get a look in!



I remember one of my sight-reading pieces was Howells *Gloucester Service*. Lucian insisted that I held on to those very long notes at the end of several phrases, right to the end, to see how good was my breath control! My prepared piece was Gibbons '*Record of John*'. Little did I know how many times I would go on and sing that with the choir, including recording it for West German Radio and Swiss Radio, as well as it being included on a choir cassette. I was the only candidate being auditioned for the one alto choral scholar vacancy remaining, but Lucian gave no indication whether I was good enough. That had to wait for a letter a couple of weeks later.

There were only three altos that first year. I was one of two alto choral scholars on Decani; on Cantoris there was a lay vicar. The first few months were a very steep learning curve. I knew hardly any of the repertoire as I had not been a cathedral chorister. For the first term at least I could learn from the experienced (postgraduate) choral scholar next to me, Gary Jones, who had been a choral scholar at Christchurch Oxford, opposite James Bowman (I was so in awe of him singing with my 'alto idol' – I was not to know that years later I would become acquainted with James Bowman, perform solos in front of him, even sing a duet with him and stand in for him in a concert).

At that first Christmas, the Cantoris alto lay vicar (Colin Broughton) left, seemingly rather unexpectedly. That meant I went over to Cantoris and there were just two altos for the rest of the year. To say I found that challenging is an understatement. Brian Hann (bass lay vicar and later punctator) once told me that singing in a cathedral choir was basically "hours of boredom, punctuated by seconds of terror". That second term for me was quite the opposite! Thankfully the Cantoris tenor choral scholar next to me, Mark Johnstone, usefully sang corrections and prevented too many 'variations on a printed theme'. My first year was Andrew Nethsingha's year as a probationer.



I returned to Decani during the second year and have been on that side since (in the late 1990s there was a slight interruption due to family reasons, but I never completely left as I frequently depped for Brian Northcott, job-shared with him for a couple of years and then returned to full-time). For the first few years, the composition of the alto section changed frequently, with some choral scholars only singing for one or two years. One alto choral scholar was even required by the Dean & Chapter to leave the choir after he had failed his university first year and was unemployed. It was felt at the time that an unemployed member of the back row would set a bad example to the boys; thank goodness attitudes to unemployment have changed!! A lay vicar (Robin Davidson) was not appointed until 1978, so the alto section was purely choral scholars until then. It was not until 1980 that we actually had four altos (1979-1980 there had been only two of us, as there had been from the Christmas of my first year) and it has been three or four since then. Thankfully, with the introduction of female altos by Andrew Millington (Anna Rose was the first) we have usually been able to have four altos every year. The presence of the ladies also has the wonderful benefit of taking the strain out of any top Fs – Bruckner's Ave Maria can now be approached with a smile!.



Altos—2019

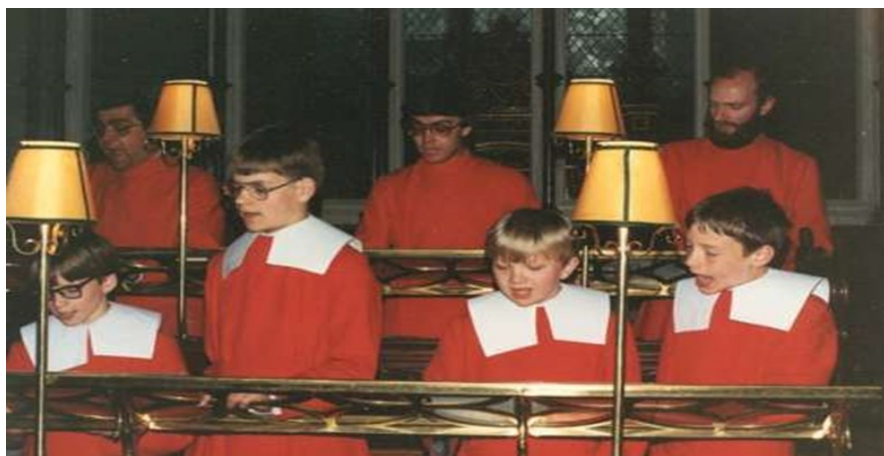
Also, an interesting non-musical side-effect of having female altos is that it was noticed it caused a reduction in flatulence and audible belching in the adult vestry (though one particular female alto was especially skilled at the latter!)

I can't remember exactly when I was made a lay vicar. There used to be a rule that a lay vicar could not be in full-time education. As I was doing a PhD, it meant I was in that state until about 1983, so I guess it would have been about then. I remember Martin Shaw was Succentor at the time, and he organised the installation.



For many years the convention among the adults was to call everyone Mr *surname* and never use first names, even in general conversation. The choristers were similarly called just by surnames. This changed when the girl choristers started, as it was felt inappropriate to call them in this way and so all choristers were referred to by first name to avoid any discrimination in practices. It was many years before I had the courage to call Lucian by his first name. But I was not alone in that; for a very long time, only Brian Hann had the privilege of using Lucian's first name. But fashions change, and from the late-1990s first names were increasingly adopted, even for members of Chapter. But that did not guarantee that Lucian would remember your name. After many years in the choir, the name of Mr Phil Hobbs (tenor lay vicar) escaped Lucian during a rehearsal, and he merely said "Whoever you are" -- much mirth followed!

So many changes and so many events have happened during my years in the choir. Some of them, and the progress of the hair on the top of my head slipping down to form a beard, and becoming grey, can be seen in the photographs on the ECOCA web pages



Choir tours started in 1982, thanks to the efforts of Mark Perry (tenor lay vicar) who, compared to what is common now for cathedral choirs, surprisingly had to persuade the Dean & Chapter that they were a valid activity for a cathedral choir (but then, at that time, the Dean & Chapter could not see the point of having a cathedral shop!).



The first tour was to northern Germany. There followed a period of tours about every two years, then every year once girl choristers began in 1994, with the boys and girls alternating each year; more recently it has been the practice of taking the senior boy and girl choristers on the same tour. Rising costs, ensuring appropriate safeguarding and then Covid have meant that tours are proving more difficult and have become less frequent. Regrettably, I did not go on all of the tours as I did not like flying until relatively recently.

As the saying goes, "what happens on tour, stays on tour", and relating all our adventures would require so many words, but I should mention a few highlights. We sang Eucharist in St Mark's Venice, an amazing experience, though we never saw the service as we were up in a gallery, and a priest standing beside Lucian told us when to sing and to stop – the latter even if we were not at the end of a piece (which included Monteverdi's *Cantate Domino*!). When recording for West German Radio, the producer was, shall we say, 'demanding'. Lucian had enough of the repeated comments about how we were singing Britten's *Jubilate*, and firmly but quietly said "I am sure that is how Ben would have liked it sung". No more recording takes after that.

A tour to Rome saw us singing Eucharist in St Peter's Basilica. A wonderful and amusing experience, caused by us having three of their operatic tenors providing parts of the service, and the organist using an electronic keyboard to work out the pitch the priest was singing at so that he could follow with the accompanied response. Returning home from a tour to Lugano, in a coach driving through the night on motorways, John Turner saved the lives of the choir when he noticed the driver had fallen asleep at the wheel and so he ran the length of the coach to wake him up.

Thanks be to John!

