



Exeter Cathedral Old Choristers' Association

***Newsletter
March 2025***



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Welcome to the ECOCA Newsletter of March 2025. This edition introduces the new officers of the ECOCA Committee, as well as looking back to the introduction of the Girl Choristers in the year of 1994-95.

There is an article on the opening of the Friends Cloister Gallery, which will no doubt feature in many Easter Monday Reunions to come.

Dr Mike Dobson has kindly provided articles on ECOCA Cofounder Edgar Herbert, and our link with the Exeter Cathedral Choir Association. Matthew Smith rounds off the newsletter with his memories of boarding in the noughties.

This is the first newsletter that is being sent to members directly from our new email account. Please feel free to get in touch if you want to share any news or memories by emailing ecocanewsletter@gmail.com.

This newsletter is also published on the ECOCA [website](#), along with all previous editions since 2010.

Matthew Ryan

Old Chorister 1983—1987

ECOCA Committee Officers

Cressida Parsons, Chair



I joined ECS in 1997 and became a Chorister in 2000, singing in the girls' choir until 2005. I then went on to St Margaret's School, Exeter College and I read for a degree in Psychology at the University of Bangor.

I returned to Exeter Cathedral after graduating to run the events department and a move to St Paul's Cathedral, London followed to look after their corporate events and filming (a career highlight organising Paddington 2!). The West Country called and I returned to setup the Exeter Cathedral Christmas Market. During this time I met and married the then Assistant Director of Music, Tim Parsons. It wasn't a deliberate choice to become so wrapped up in English Cathedral Life!



St Edmundsbury
Cathedral

In 2021, we moved to Suffolk, working at St Edmundsbury Cathedral in fundraising. In 2024 we moved back to the West Country as Tim was appointed Director of Music at Wells. I continue to work both for St Edmundsbury and for Exeter.

I have maintained the love for choral singing gained as a chorister, through membership of many different choirs over the years, most recently joining Wells Chamber Choir. When not working or singing you can find me cooking or walking our scottie dog, Bridget.

Lots of people say if you cut me in half Exeter Cathedral would be inside! After nearly 10 years on the committee I'm looking forward to the next chapter as ECOCA Chair, where it is a privilege to lead the amazing work of our association.

If you have any questions or simply want to say hello then please do email me on: ecocachair@gmail.com

Charlotte Longhurst

Honorary Secretary



I was a chorister and boarder between 2004-2008, where amongst many opportunities and experiences, I was fortunate enough to tour both America and Switzerland, be part of two professional CD recordings alongside radio and TV broadcasts. My years as a chorister were hugely formative and I still look back on my time in the choir and at the school as the best years of my life.

I was a founding member of Isca Voices and remained musically active whilst I studied Biomedical Science at St George's University, London. I moved back to Devon to complete my midwifery training and now work as a midwife in the RD&E; I am currently on maternity leave having had my second child shortly before Christmas.

In 2021, I got married in Exeter Cathedral with the choir comprising of former choristers and members of the back row. Whilst music sadly no longer features in my day to day life, I always look forwards to the annual ECOCA reunion as both an opportunity to sing old favourites and to catch up with school friends. I have been on the ECOCA committee since 2019 and am thrilled to have been elected as secretary last year, taking over the reigns from Jonny.



If you would like to get in touch, my email address is:
ecocasecretary@gmail.com

Matthew Smith

Honorary Treasurer



I was a chorister between 2001-2006, and was fortunate enough to proceed on several tours, including to Europe and the USA - the USA tour was the final choral activity my year of 8 (!!) boy choristers and 4 girl choristers conducted before leaving the Choir. It was quite the way to end!

After leaving the choir as a boy, I was fortunate enough to return occasionally to deputise as a 'gentleman' of the choir from the age of 14. I moved rapidly from top-Cs, to bottom-Cs, standing awe-struck next to Julian Sutton and Matt Cann as I hastily sight-read the bass line of music I'd sang dozens of times as a treble.



I continued to sing throughout my secondary education at Trinity School, Teignmouth and Exeter School, before I joined the Navy after completing my A-Levels - something chorister life prepared me well for. After a decade of service at sea, I left the military and live near Newton Abbot with my wife and one-year old, now working as a consultant specialising in maritime navigation. I joined the ECOCA Committee in April 2024, and became Treasurer in June.

If you would like to contact me, my email address is:
ecocafinances@gmail.com

Choir News



The choir began the new choral year on Saturday 7th September 2024. During evensong on Sunday 8th September there were installations of the:

Organ Scholar, Adam Field

Cantoris Alto Lay Vicar, Celia Stoddart

Cantoris Tenor Choral

Adam Field (right) with
Assistant Director of Music,
Michael Stephens-Jones

Adam joins us after reading music at Selwyn College, Cambridge, where he held the Percy Young Senior Organ Scholarship. Adam is a Fellow of the Royal College of Organists (FRCO). He previously held organ scholarships at Croydon Minster and Portsmouth Cathedral.



Eight senior choristers were invested, duly receiving their ribbons and badges of office. There was a drinks reception in the nave after the service, with a celebratory cake for the senior choristers.

Celia Stoddard
Alto Lay Vicar



Girl Choristers at 30

Stephen Tanner



In the late 1980's Dr Richard Seal, Organist and Master of the Choristers at Salisbury Cathedral had a vision, that the incomparable opportunities and musical experiences of a cathedral chorister education should be afforded to girls as well as boys. With the support of an equally determined Dean and Chapter his vision became reality in 1991. Salisbury was not the first cathedral to offer singing opportunities for girls but it was the first of the major, ancient English cathedrals. This far sighted and brave decision was hugely controversial producing a tsunami of protest and debate.

When I was first appointed as Director of Music at Exeter Cathedral School in 1987, the school - the oldest in Devon - was a small, traditional prep school for boys and all the choristers were required to board. By the early 1990s many schools were actively considering the many benefits of offering co-education and for Exeter Cathedral School it made sense to do so alongside the formation of a Cathedral Girls Choir. I was offered the immense privilege of founding and directing this choir and continued in this role until July 2016.

The girls sang their first evensong on 17 November 1994. There was so much wonderful music making during that time. Foreign tours, recordings and several BBC Radio 3 Choral Evensong broadcasts were inevitable highlights but of most significance was that the singing of girls alongside boys, men and later women as alto choral scholarships were offered, became part of the rhythm of the daily Offices. It began with Monday evensongs and occasional weekend services until it was the full range of services every other weekend with equal participation in concert activities.

The girls developed a very strong identity and bond and the original group of choristers from 1994 I know are immensely proud of what they and all their subsequent colleagues have achieved. Now, virtually all cathedrals and major places of worship offer a wide range of choral opportunities for girls, including youth and junior choirs and through a wide range of outreach initiatives. As a teacher of music, one of the greatest pleasures is to learn of former pupils who have pursued careers in your subject so it is a particular joy to know of a significant number of former Exeter Cathedral Girl Choristers who are now professional singers.



As we mark thirty years of Girl Choristers at Exeter, Cathedral Choristerships continue to represent a gold standard within music education. There are many challenges ahead. Cathedral music is very expensive and many institutions face huge financial challenges but we must do all we can to celebrate and support this extraordinary cultural legacy.



Stephen Tanner with Girl Choristers in 2014

Friends Cloister Gallery



The Friends' Cloister Gallery provides a covered walkway, connecting Exeter Cathedral with its 13th century Chapter House and Pearson buildings. The new structure is the most significant building to adjoin the cathedral since its Speke and Oldham chapels, constructed around 500 years ago.



The Friends' Cloister Gallery is built on the same foundations as the original medieval cloisters which were demolished in 1657. Following its demolition, houses known as 'miserable hovels' were built on the site. These houses were pulled down between 1813-1817.

The new cloister, designed by Cathedral Architect Camilla Finlay, was built using locally sourced stone from Somerset and north Dorset. It has been named in recognition of the support from The Friends of Exeter Cathedral, an independent charity founded in 1929 to help preserve and improve the cathedral's fabric and furnishings. The charity generously donated £1 million towards the building cost.

Edgar Stafford Arthur Herbert

Co-founder of ECOCA



Jeremy Creighton Herbert, son of Edgar, got in touch with Dr Mike Dobson in 2024, and has provided this additional information about our co-founder.

Edgar led a hugely diverse life. He was a chorister at Exeter Cathedral from 1915 to 1919 before joining the Telegraph Company. During the Second World War he was part of the Long Range Desert Group and The Eighth Army. Edgar spoke fluent Arabic, and dressed in a djellaba, concealing maps in pitted dates to help free prisoners of war in North Africa.

Edgar captained the Egypt Cricket team after the war when he, his wife and son Jeremy lived in Tripoli. He was an exceptional wicket keeper. After returning to the village of Lymptone in Devon, he played for The Devon Dumplings!

Edgar was known for his energy, a boundless sense of humour, being hugely mischievous, generous to a fault, and was a very charismatic figure loved and treasured by many.

The list of people he knew was endless, from the worlds of UK diplomacy, politicians, high ranking military officers, authors, composers, musicians, artists, and sporting figures.



Edgar accumulated an amazing autograph book with entries from numerous musicians, including [a letter to him from Vaughan Williams](#).

Jeremy remembers that teenage friends would flock to their cottage not because of him, but to be in the company of his father and also his very remarkable polyglot mother.

She was a driver for Polish generals during the war, and also drove for General 'Ike' Dwight Eisenhower (34th President of the USA) on occasions when he visited the UK. She dated David Niven and Stuart Grainger and a few other Hollywood 'smoothies' before marrying Edgar!

Edgar, Lionel Dakers, Frank Cotton and a few others had the ambitious idea in the early 1960s of forming an Old Choristers' Association. The idea came to fruition in 1964.

Edgar was a very significant contributor to creating the legacy of a successful and sustainable ECOCA. Jeremy well remembers his father, whilst in failing health, sitting at his desk writing pen and ink letters to many former choristers, encouraging them to enlist and return to the Cathedral to sing annually on those happy Easter Mondays.

Edgar died in Exmouth Post Office (February 20th 1967) cracking a joke at the counter when taking in Common Entrance Exam Papers to be posted off as he was an invigilator at St. Peter's Prep School, Lymington.

Lionel Dakers, Cathedral Organist at the time, helped put together the music for his memorial service, held about a week after he died.

Exeter Cathedral Choir

Association: Dr Mike Dobson



Some of you may remember the Matthew Locke Society. A few years ago this became the Exeter Cathedral Choir Association. The aims are similar, to promote opportunities for Chorister enrichment, entertainment and relaxation. The Association has a much wider remit to encourage the corporate life and fellowship within and between members of the whole choir and those directly related to it: the Choristers and their parents or legal caregivers, the Lay Vicars and Choral Scholars.

Enrichment of the choristers' experience is carried out through the Association organising treats such as a visit to the cinema as a break during the hectic schedule before Christmas. Some of you may remember the annual trip to the pantomime at the Northcott Theatre, with Gordon Pike 'quietly' leading the audience song. Older ECOCA members may even remember the Mayor's tea party in the Guildhall.



The notion of 'choir family' and fellowship is promoted through organisation of a Christmas dinner between the morning and afternoon services on Christmas Day, to which all choristers and their immediate family are invited. This is usually held in the Cathedral School.



There is the Holy Saturday Sports, held in memory of Noah, with whom some of you may have sung. It takes place at the Exe Bridges Sports Centre and is sometimes followed with a bring-and-share picnic lunch. Many of you will remember the equivalent Dec v. Can skittles match organised by ECOCA and held in the Lee Arms skittle alley during Holy Week.

Lunches and refreshments are organised for chorister installation days, vesting of senior choristers (including a cake with the names of the senior choristers) and valedictory. For valedictory, the Association organises the printing of special books for each leaving chorister, containing their own favourite pieces of music and a collection of photographs.

Fundraising is an important aspect of the Choir Association, with a significant part of this being to help raise funds for the choir tours that take place every two or three years. Events to raise funds included a pub quiz in the Nave in 2024! Another event included some chorister parents hosting a Cèilidh in 2023 specifically in aid of the Choir Tour Fund. If you have any fund-raising ideas or sponsorship suggestions, please do contact us!

The Choir Association and the ECOCA Committee want to increase the involvement of ECOCA members in the Choir Association's activities and support for the choristers. This is one of the main reasons there is a liaison member on the committees of both organisations. Choir Association events are advertised on the ECOCA website.

If you have any ideas for future activities, fund-raising, or would like to support or sponsor any of the events or aims mentioned here, please do make contact. The best way to contact the Association is via the Secretary:

cas@exeter-cathedral.org.uk

Boarding Memories from the Noughties: Matthew Smith

(Part 2)



In so many ways, boarding at ECS is a shared experience between those who did so, regardless of era. Equally, the changes in routine, location and personalities mean that each person's experience is distinctly unique.

I boarded at a time that, looking back on it, was the last 'old school' time. Mobile phones, especially for children, were a real rarity; 'prep' was fully 'analogue', with no computers in sight and evening activities in the little free time there was consisted of either shared TV viewing with 30-40 other frazzled youngsters, or running around the Chantry and playground until it was getting dark.



I was a full-time boarder from 2001-2006, in the choral era of Andrew Millington and the house-master / mistress era of Dennis and Anne Brittain - all wonderful people who did so much to make the experience a positive one.



My memory is, already, hazy, but days would start early with Mr Brittain acting as a firm but fair alarm clock. At different points I was in different rooms, including Vaughan-Williams, the 8 (or 11 with 3 camp beds in it) bed 'mega-room', through to Byrd, a bijou 3-bed.

In my days at Britannia Royal Naval College going through naval officer training, the very biggest cabin slept 30+ trainee officers, and would be referred to as 'The Zoo' - if I were to name anywhere 'The Zoo' at ECS, it would probably be the dining room at any of the boarders meal-times.

Breakfast always tasted strange, being as it was *after* we were made to brush our teeth. A bowl literally overflowing with coco-pops, washed down with sugary orange juice meant we were fully 'buzzing' by the time we were in the old choir school having completed 30 minutes of music practice.

Waiting at the bottom for Mr Millington to open the door, followed by pushing and shoving up the least health and safety-compliant spiral staircase to then sing surrounded by shelves that strained under the weight of aging, water-marked, taped-together music.

Throughout the day boarders and non-boarders, choristers and non-choristers, all got mixed up in the daily routine. Notable non-boarding related memories include being chased by Mr Bagnall to Bromham's Farm - he would cycle, we would run. The less spirited / able amongst us would be encouraged along by him clipping our heels with his bike wheel, and Mr Pike being (very easily) egged on to do handbrake turns in the minibus on any icy car-park.

The weekends as boarders were heavily punctuated by the service schedule. However some 'routines' were staples of my weekend at Eyre House. Visiting the South Street news agents and eating so many sweets I felt sick during Saturday evensong.



Buying yet more sugar from the 'tuck-shop' operated by Mrs Brittain in the common room, ahead of us all sitting down to watch the (notoriously non-child friendly medical drama) Casualty, the lottery (even though none of us, obviously, had a ticket) and then going to bed a bit later. These are memories that will always stay with me and will always make me smile.

After a long day I would often be wearily kneeling during the prayers of evensong and look with pity at those of my comrades that had a significant drive home to go afterwards. I would occasionally get homesick, or have had a bad day - often at the hands of people I now count as some of my closest friends - and long to go home, but there was something marvellous about being able to hang up the black gown (mortar boards had been dropped from the outfit by this point) and run straight to supper.

From there, an hour and half of prep, not forgetting to get your homework book signed by whoever was supervising this, by now exhausted, room of 8-13 year olds.



Being let out of prep was a moment of relief. The work of the day was done. Back to the boarding house for a wash and into pyjamas, before maybe having 15 minutes before it was time to go to bed. Mr and Mrs Brittain would close out the day, wishing us a good night and turning off the light, before it begun all over again the next day.

There are so many elements I could go into, including boarder of the month, the 'Bistro', the under-the-stairs pay phone and the creepy laundry / games-room / cellar that existed in the basement of Eyre House. I don't know about you, but I'd go back and do it all again in a heartbeat.

