Mellor Church Choir Report 2021 *Tom Howling*

2021 started with the choir in lockdown due to the ongoing pandemic situation. ‘Trebles’ Biscuits’ continued weekly using Zoom with a ‘Composer of the Month’ theme – Benjamin Britten in January, Samuel Sebastian Wesley in February, and Thomas Tallis in March. Maintaining social contact alongside a bit of choir-related education was vital in keeping the choir going in the absence of being able to meet for rehearsals or services. Adult choristers were also entertained by regular online ‘virtual pub’ meetings organised by Ian Collyer including playing ‘Matthew Howling’s The Wheel’.

Zoom services continued online on Sunday morning with recorded contributions from the choir and John LeGrove providing weekly recorded organ music.

Just before Easter, COVID restrictions were relaxed a little allowing some creative short-notice gatherings. Good Friday saw the full choir singing together outside and socially distanced around the cross at the west end of the church. For the Easter Midday service, we were able to have a small choir inside memorably starting the service off with an uplifting *Hallelujah Chorus*.

Following Easter, rehearsals and Sunday Midday services restarted (in parallel with the morning Zoom services) and monthly Choral Evensongs with smaller choir ‘bubbles’: Trebles, Upper Voices and Lower Voices singing separately. With creative repertoire for these voice combinations including *Dyson in C minor* *Evening Service* and Schubert’s *Psalm 23* for the Trebles and Upper Voices and *Sumsion in G for Lower Voices* the choir enjoyed some live singing again.

From Pentecost in May, Zoom services stopped and church services returned to their usual 10am timing with live-streaming of services starting to reach those who were not able to make it to church. Live streaming has been a welcome innovation since this time enabling those unable to attend services in person to join in with Worship from St Thomas on the church YouTube channel. Thanks to Nathan Monk, Ian Collyer and the whole Live-streaming team for their hard work on this.

It was a delight to be able to have a full church and choir to celebrate the marriage of our former Director of Music Marc Hall to Laura Matthews. As hoped, rules were relaxed just in time and there was plenty of music with full choir and organ (Ben Collyer returning to play) enhanced by a string quartet. Music included Parry’s *I was glad*, Goodall’s *Love Divine* and the *Alleluia* from Handel’s *The King shall rejoice.*

Another creative adaptation to the ongoing restrictions in July was to hold the first full choir Choral Evensong for over a year outside in the churchyard outside the East window. It was a lovely warm evening and a large congregation, socially spaced amongst the graves and wildflowers, enjoyed the service which featured new music for the choir: Samuel Sebastian Wesley’s *Evening Service in E* and *Do not be afraid* by Phillip Stopford. This service was also live-streamed and to date, the service has had 346 views and the extracted recording the choir singing *Do not be afraid* has had 686 views on YouTube. I think that counts as ‘going viral’ despite the virus.

The highlight of the year was our week-long tour to Hereford Cathedral and Tewkesbury Abbey in August. Against the backdrop of the ongoing pandemic but relaxed restrictions, tour arrangements required a great deal of careful planning and liaising with our venues and accommodation to ensure a safe tour. With the help of Matthew Howling as Choirmaster’s Assistant and team of accompanists (John LeGrove, Ben Collyer, John Wilson and Jackie Shah assisted by Nathan Monk and Eleanor Rosser who both also played during services) we managed to rehearse the choir in two half-choir ‘bubbles’ – Decani and Cantoris in the well-ventilated choir rehearsal room throughout the mornings and afternoons. The choir then coming together in the cathedral for the pre-service rehearsal and evensong – sitting on opposite sides of the Quire. Tewkesbury Abbey would only allow a reduced number to sing – socially distanced and very distant from the congregation in a huge acoustic (presenting musical challenges which those singers involved rose to with distinction). The whole choir worked very hard all week producing an excellent standard of music. Highlights included singing *The Wilderness* and *Blessed be the God and Father* (both written by SS Wesley during his time at Hereford Cathedral) and both a Mattins and Evensong directed by Matthew Howling which included Britten’s *Festival Te Deum* and Stopford’s *Do not be afraid*. Recordings of the music made of the choir by the cathedral during the services are available free on the choir’s SoundCloud platform (Go to SoundCloud site on the internet and search Mellor Hereford Tour).

The end of the tour saw the retirement of three important members of the choir as they headed off to University. Zoë Shah, Molly Burrows (Head Chorister) and Matthew Howling (Choirmaster’s Assistant) received RSCM long-service medals.

Andrew Piper, the Precentor of Hereford Cathedral was effusive in his praise for the choir both during the final service (just before Molly’s excellent Blessed be the God and Father solo) and in an email:

*“Many thanks to you and all your team for coming to sing the services here in recent days: we were delighted by the very high standard of music that the choir of St Thomas’s Church offered in worship. I know well from my own experience of choir tours just how much careful thought and planning is required in advance of such a trip, not to mention the stamina needed to keep going during the tour, and we do not take that hard work for granted: your contribution to our worship was greatly valued.*

*I was deeply impressed by the quality of your choir’s psalm singing, especially as there are so few choirs that are still able to achieve such accuracy and lightness of touch: the psalms are the heart of the daily office, and your choir brought them to life. After the services several members of the congregation remarked favourably on the well-balanced ensemble sound, the lively word-painting, and the dynamic range and control of your singers. So many choirs (especially the larger ones) miss the possibilities of singing pianissimo in our peerless acoustic, but not your choir: they showed to great effect the whole dynamic range from pianissimo to fortissimo, which drew out beautifully the drama of the music. One member of the congregation used the word ‘alive’ to describe their singing; another used the word ‘sensitive’; and other comments focussed with approval on the fact that so many young Christians in Mellor have the increasingly rare opportunity to experience the Anglican choral repertoire through their participation in your church choir: this tradition is a truly precious spiritual (as well as musical) resource to celebrate and to secure for the benefit of future generations of worshippers.*

*I also want to complement Matthew on his conducting and your organists, Ben and John, on their intelligent and well-considered accompaniments of the choir, and their skilful management of the Willis, especially as they had to manage without the swell division, which is currently under repair. Their playing provided just the right amount of support for the singers, and their voluntaries were especially welcome.*

*Please pass on my thanks to all your musicians and to everyone who supported the tour: the Chapter is grateful for the concentrated effort that you all put into the preparation and delivery of the services, and we hope that everyone enjoyed their time with us in Hereford. The Chancellor joins me in expressing the hope that your choir will come and sing here again in the future, whenever you feel inclined to tour the Marches.”*

Thank you to Rachel Howling who as Tour Organiser organised great accommodation and meals at the Royal College for the Blind and an incredible ‘Dumb day’ outing to Symond’s Yat which included the whole choir and groupies having a picnic and paddling in small boats down the River Wye in lovely summer sunshine.

Thank you to Matthew Howling who organised various sporting activities including rounders and ‘Non-stop’ cricket in the evenings and a memorable and exciting game of cricket overlooked by the massive Tewkesbury Abbey.

Thank you also to all the parents, choir ‘groupies’ and congregation who travelled to support the choir in Hereford and Tewkesbury. It was so nice to see so many friendly Mellor faces in the congregations throughout the week.

The start of the new Choir Year in September saw the appointment of new Head Choristers Hannah Scott and Emily Britton, and a new Choirmaster’s Assistant Oscar Qualter. Eleanor Rosser was appointed as Junior Organ Scholar to work alongside Nathan Monk who was promoted to Senior Organ Scholar.

In the autumn, choir was back to operating pretty-much as normal rehearsing and singing in services as a full choir. We had managed to recruit new choristers (against the odds) during the pandemic and lost a number of senior choristers. Recognising the need to develop the younger choristers to build the strength of the treble line, the choir started a new initiative: A new 6-6.30pm session for younger trebles in the Parish Centre, the ‘Vocal Development Group’ led by Clare Jackson and John LeGrove. This has been well-received and proved effective in providing an informal fun space for the younger choristers joining the choir while developing confidence with singing technique.

The ’internal ribbons’ training (RSCM Voice for Life Scheme) for the trebles was also able to restart thanks to the internal ribbons team (Rachel Howling, Clare Jackson, Oscar Qualter, Nathan Monk).

Following the Harvest Festival (featuring *Cauliflowers fluffy* and new Rutter anthem *Look at the world*) we had an innovation, the Pet Service. This was a huge success with choristers bringing along their well-behaved pets to worship with them in church. We sang a lively and fitting anthem: *All God’s Creatures got a place in the choir*!

It was fantastic to have a ‘back to normal’ run of choir highlights towards the end of the year with the return to Fort Belan on the coast of Wales for our rehearsal weekend, Advent Carol Service, Winter Wonderland in Marple Bridge (despite the weather!), Rose Queen Carol Singing, Nine Lessons and Carols and the Choir Party. The music for Nine Lessons and Carols in 2021 was taken completely from OUP Carols for Choirs 1 (The Green Book) which was having its 60-year anniversary of publication.

Unfortunately, the year finished badly with an unexpected resurgence of COVID with its delta variant affecting many, services on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day had to be without a choir.

We finished the year re-emerging from isolation and gathering at a Holiday Inn on the outskirts of St Albans undaunted, seeing in 2022 while preparing to sing at Westminster Abbey on January 2nd.

I would like to thank Tracy and the PCC for supporting the continuation of the choir as much as possible this year. I would like to thank the choir steering group (CSG), choir and parents of choristers for sticking with it and continuing to show their support.

I think despite the ongoing pandemic we have had a more successful and much fuller year with the choir than we were able to in 2021. We have continued to be flexible and creative in terms of manging what we can do. We have managed to recruit steadily despite the circumstances. Resources such as the choir website [www.mellorchurchchoir.co.uk](http://www.mellorchurchchoir.co.uk) and SoundCloud continue to develop. We have a lot to look forward to in 2022 including trips to sing in Westminster Abbey and St. Paul’s Cathedral.