Church Choir Report 2019 *Tom Howling*

We started 2019 without a permanent organist following Andrew Dean’s retirement at Christmas. The organ playing duties were filled with a selection of local organists. Will Jeys (talented young organist in the 6th form at The Manchester Grammar School) was appointed as Organ Scholar, taking the bulk of the work at the organ bench from January through to May. After Will left us, he moved on to take up a position as Organ Scholar at Liverpool Cathedral and from September 2020 will be the Organ Scholar at Hertford College, Oxford. As organists are increasingly rare we are looking for every opportunity at Mellor to help in the development of young organists. Will goes to join two of our former choristers Ben Collyer and Elsa Shah as current Oxford college organ scholars.

In February the choir travelled to sing choral evensong in the historic setting of St Asaph Cathedral in Wales. The clergy were very welcoming and complimentary about our singing. The trebles planted some daffodils on the grave of composer William Mathias whose anthem *Lift up your heads o ye gates* we sangduring the service.

In March the choir performed a concert in church alongside young soloists from the RNCM. The concert which raised money for the church was instigated by one of our recent former choristers James Holt as a mark of thanks for the musical experience, education and support he has received at St Thomas’ in the choir. The soloists and church choir joined to perform Schubert’s beautiful *Mass in G*. This was a busy weekend for the choir as the following day was our St Patrick’s Day Choral Evensong with much Irish-themed music.

The choir played its usual role over the Easter services supporting worship on Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Sunday with a varied repertoire of seasonal music including a rousing *Hallelujah Chorus* on Easter morning. The ‘Cross of Christ’ service – a moving meditation with music and readings on the Passion narrative was held on the evening of Palm Sunday.

In May we were very fortunate to appoint John LeGrove as Organist on a 75% basis. John has been a friend of the choir, filling in as organist in a temporary manner and accompanying us on our tours away since Andrew Dean was Director of Music. John is an accomplished organist, having the Fellowship of the Royal College of Organists and is a long-standing pillar of the teaching staff at Cheetham’s School of Music in Manchester. He also has a passionate interest in trains.

Recruitment of choristers has continued to be a major theme with more ‘Pizza rehearsals’ throughout the year. These social open rehearsals have resulted in new trebles, new adult members and several more children who have given at least the pizzas a try. Thanks to Jo Qualter, Lynda Gwyther, Anthea and Guy Nichols and others for assisting with the catering.

In the choir we follow the RSCM Voice for Life training programme for choristers. This including in-house training from our team of volunteers and entering some choristers for external exams. This year Molly Burrows and Laura Jarvis gained their Bronze (Dean’s) award – congratulations!

The highlight of the choir’s year came on 23rd July when the choir and supporters travelled down to London for the day to sing Choral Evensong in Westminster Abbey. The invitation to sing at the Abbey is a rare privilege and followed one of the Abbey Canons hearing us sing in August 2018 in Rochester Cathedral. The day was baking hot and we were relieved to have an air-conditioned coach which took us from Mellor with all our robes and music to the gates of the Abbey. While William Wragg MP showed our supporters around the Houses of Parliament, the choir rehearsed hard in the historic setting of the Abbey. We did get chance to look around the Abbey (we had special security tags!). Choral evensong was fantastic with a capacity choir of 40 with a congregation of several hundred (with many friendly Mellor faces included). The Abbey clergy were very pleased with the choir and we were invited to return. The whole day was an amazing experience which will live long in the memory of all those that took part.

The summer residential was for four days in Lichfield Cathedral in early August. The trip was well organised by tour manager Rachel Howling. We stayed, along with a happy band of supporters, in a hotel within walking distance of the cathedral. The Music School on the Cathedral Close was our base during the day where we prepared all five cathedral services. The music was of a high standard and the clergy and staff were very appreciative. We had time for lots of fun too with meals out, a cabaret and park activities on the Saturday afternoon which included swan pedalos (nobody fell in the lake).

Following the summer break, in September we resumed our weekly routine of Friday evening rehearsals and Sunday morning services with monthly Choral Evensongs on the third Sunday of the month.

The autumn also saw the return of Bach at Twilight. A series of three excellent concerts performed by Andrew Dean and produced by Chris Mann completed the series which had been interrupted by illness two years previously. The concerts were a huge success drawing in large audiences to hear the music of Bach played by Andrew and guests on our Mander organ by candlelight as the evening light faded outside. The Bach at Twilight series of concerts in total raised an incredible £10,000 for church funds. The series ended appropriately enough on St. Andrew’s Day with fireworks.

The preparation for the festive season started as Mellor Choir tradition dictates in a small Welsh fort for a whole weekend of rehearsals and other fun. Three particular highlights this year: The biggest and best ever cabaret organised by Mike Benford-Miller (including a memorable song about local train stations and a pink panther), a new walk up and down a hill fort by the sea (ice cream shop was closed!) and the food masterminded by Glyn Britton – with the help of his team he managed amazing food for the whole choir for the weekend on a low budget.

Winter Wonderland, Advent Carol Service, Nine Lessons and Carols, Choir Christmas Party passed in a blur during December and then it was Christmas. This year we had a special Midnight Mass service with a small string orchestra – organised by Caroline Monk. It was such a beautiful service – carols and Schubert’s Mass in G all with string accompaniment. The violins and viola made use of the extra space by the choir created by adapting the rear pews on the north side of the nave, the cello and double bass squeezing in either side of the organ. It would be good to develop more instrumental parts to augment the choir and organ in the future.

We look forward to what 2020 has in store including a *Little Jazz Mass* in May and a summer residency at Truro Cathedral in August.