Church Choir Report 2018 *Tom Howling*

January 7th 2018 marked the farewell service for Alex and Nick. A full choral extravaganza which included the somewhat inappropriately titled ‘I was glad’. There was a different organist each week in church holding the fort with Tom continuing his role as interim choirmaster due to the absence through illness of Director of Music Andrew Dean.

In February Andrew made his return as regular organist. There was an exciting new development in the vestry as the choir music library was rehoused and a set of pigeon holes (recycled from Chipping Campden) was installed improving security and storage of the music. We also had a trip by coach with a contingent from the church to Leicester Cathedral. The choral evensong sung there by the choir was very well received by the cathedral staff and we were invited to return any time we liked.

March saw the ‘Beast from the East’ bring deep snow and a very unusual service for the hardy few (8 choir and 10 others) – unaccompanied hymns and an unseasonal rendition of In the Bleak Midwinter!

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. Palm Sunday saw a new innovation: a ‘Cross of Christ’ service – a moving meditation with music and readings on the Passion narrative.

Recruitment has been a major theme of the year with several ‘Pizza rehearsals’ – our recruitment innovation which started in May. Over the year these have resulted in 8 new trebles, 2 new adult members and several more trebles who have given at least the pizza rehearsals a try. Thanks to Lynda Gwyther and others for assisting with the catering.

Monthly Choral Evensongs continued on the third Sunday of the month building up the repertoire needed for the choir’s summer residential week singing the services in Rochester Cathedral. There was also a Choral Matins for Pentecost in May.

The week in Rochester in early August was the highlight of the choir’s year. We stayed along with a merry band of supporters in the incredible stately home-like surrounding of Cobham Hall just 5 miles outside Rochester itself. The trip was fully catered with all meals provided by very helpful kitchen staff. The grounds included a mile-long avenue of lime trees which guided us to Cobham village and a selection of historic pubs (including one of Charles Dicken’s favourites). We were allowed to rehearse (wearing our new smart dark blue choir hoodies) in the magnificent guilt hall in Cobham Hall. Rochester Cathedral is the second oldest in the country and singing such beautiful music in that incredibly historic and special space was truly inspirational for all involved. A special mention for Ben Collyer, Elsa Shah and Rebecca Mann who all sang wonderful solos. We wished all three of them well as they departed to university – Ben Collyer as Organ Scholar of Christchurch College, Oxford studying Music, Elsa Shah as Organ Scholar of University College, Oxford studying Music and Rebecca Mann who was off to Birmingham University studying Medicine. Aside from the hard work getting the daily music ready and fit to shine in the cathedral acoustic, we had many other organised activities. These included a trip by train to experience Margate’s seaside attractions and a visit to Rochester Castle (with enormous ice creams). A visiting canon from Westminster Abbey was so impressed by the quality of our singing that he invited us to sing in Westminster Abbey in 2019 – a great honour for the choir.

The day after our last service in Rochester Cathedral, the choir were back in Mellor singing at Tracy’s installation service – a very special occasion. Welcome Tracy!

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. Social activities included the annual golf day organised by Mike Benford-Miller and many of the younger choristers took a weekend off singing to go on the church youth trip to Edale. We also had a trip to Chester Cathedral to see Eleanor Jarvis be presented with her Gold Award – the highest award in the RSCM Voice for Life training scheme – well done Eleanor.

In October, the arrangement of Andrew as Organist and Tom as Director of Music was formalised by Tracy and the PCC.

In November the choir took a lead role, together with Mellor Primary School and others in the community concert ‘Mellor Remembers’ commemorating the centenary of the ending of the First World War. In a very moving concert the choir contributed a medley of first world war songs, a recreation of the Christmas Truce – singing ‘Silent night’ with the Primary school choir and ‘There is an old belief’ – one of Parry’s Songs of Farewell (Parry himself died 100 years ago, shortly before the end of the war).

The preparation for the festive season started as Mellor Choir dictates in a small Welsh fort for a whole weekend of rehearsals and other fun. Two particular highlights this year: The biggest and best ever cabaret organised by Mike Benford-Miller (including a memorable cumber song and bell-ringing) and the food masterminded by Nick Sanders – with the help of his team he manages miracles on a low budget – full cooked breakfast for 40… no problem. Roast dinner with all the trimmings and no fuss… Amazing! The preparation that the weekend in Belan allows us made the frantic festive music-making possible.

Frantic was the word for the first weekend in December – Winter wonderland on the Saturday was followed in the evening by Mellor Church Choir’s 50th Anniversary party. The occasion to celebrate 50 years since the formation of the church choir in its current form was organised by Mike Benford-Miller. Many former members over the last 50 years attended. Roy Taylor, the original Director of Music and his family were able to be there. All four Vicars of Mellor spanning the 50 years were also in attendance. Speeches and an amazing video of the history of the choir, lots of food, drink and of course singing including a massed choir of members past and present singing the ‘Cantique de Jean Racine’ by Faure. Many thanks to Mike for all the hard work organising a fantastic celebration. The day after was the candlelit Advent Carol Service which included Samuel Sebastian Wesley’s ‘The Wilderness’ and ‘The waiting sky’ by Oliver Tarney amongst a feast of Advent music and readings.

The ‘Nine Lessons and Carols’ Christmas Carol Service was about as close to Christmas as it is possible to get which seemed to make it even more special and the service was of course followed by the choir Christmas Party in the Parish Centre with Father Christmas in attendance.

Christmas morning was Andrew’s last service as organist as he retired. We thank Andrew for his hard work and dedication in supporting the choir and church for many years and especially over the last few years as Director of Music – the highlights of which include the amazing series of Bach at Twilight recitals and leading the weeklong residency of the choir at Winchester Cathedral.

We look forward to what 2019 has in store including some exciting trips away to St Asaph Cathedral, Westminster Abbey and a summer residency at Lichfield Cathedral.