

MUSIC IN BRISTOL CATHEDRAL

When Robert Fitzharding founded the abbey of St Augustine in 1140 there were fewer than ten Canons. From the middle of the 14th century onwards there were about 18, not all in priests' orders. We do not know when singing boys were introduced into the Abbey, probably by the 14th century. There were Lady Chapel choirs singing polyphonic music separate from the choir liturgy sung by the monks or canons. We may fairly assume that, early in the history of the monastery, there were educational facilities for novitiates and singing boys and probably for sons of the opulent burghers of the adjacent borough of Bristol. There is reference to an organ in the abbey in Abbot Newland's Roll. Newland or Nailheart died in 1515.

After the dissolution of the monasteries, six new dioceses were founded in 1541 and 1542 Bristol, Chester, Gloucester, Oxford, Peterborough and Westminster (Cathedral status withdrawn 10 years later). Bristol became the Cathedral Church of the Holy and Undivided Trinity, a truncated building because the nave had been pulled down by an Abbot prior to the dissolution and had not been rebuilt. It was not until 1544 that a commission was appointed to draw up statutes for the governance of the new cathedrals. The Statutes of Bristol, promulgated on 5th July 1544, state "That, for the greater increase of the Christian faith and piety, the youth of our kingdoms shall be instructed in good literature." The Statutes list the formation of the School – Head Master, Lower Master, six choristers to be instructed by one skilful in playing the organ, other masters, butler, cook, verger under-cook and cleaners. The provisions made with respect to education were not identical in all the "new foundation" cathedrals set up at that time. Thus at Chester twenty-four boys and at Peterborough twenty boys were to be educated and maintained" at the expense of the church", whereas at Gloucester and Bristol it is simply ordained that the Grammar Masters are to teach any boys who may flock or resort to them for that purpose.

We know the names of the first six choristers. The Master of choristers (organist) was Thomas Denny. In 1589 Denny was succeeded by Elway Bevan, a pupil of Thomas Tallis and a teacher of William Child, who was born in Bristol. Child became organist of St George's Windsor (after Mundy) in 1631, organist of the chapel Royal and composer to the King in 1661. During this period, records also refer to the Revd Edward Gibbons, elder brother of Orlando Gibbons, as organist at the Cathedral. He seems to have overlapped with Elway Bevan. The Cathedral had close links with two of the greatest figures in 16th and 17th century church music, Tallis and Gibbons.

In 1610 the choir at Bristol consisted of four choristers, six vicars choral and six minor canons or priest vicars. In 1638 Wells had six choristers and fourteen vicars choral (some of whom were probably in priests' orders). In 1634 Archbishop Laud made a visitation and wrote that "the organist is a verie old man, who having done good service in the Churche, is now not able to discharge, but he is holpen by some others of the quier." The organist was Elway Bevan who had been at the cathedral for forty-five years. He was also one of the Gentleman of the Chapel Royal. Three years later (1637) he was expelled from both these offices on suspicion of being a Romanist.

Strong choral establishments in Cathedrals were part of the Elizabethan legacy, as were organs. In 1629 an organ from the Cathedral was sold for £30 to the church of St Stephen. In about 1630 a new organ by Thomas Dallam was purchased at the cost of £258.2s.7p. This organ was destroyed in the Civil War. We have no records of the period between 1642 and 1660. In 1660 Henry Glemham was appointed Dean. To carry on the services there were at first only one minor canon and three lay clerks. The Chapter house was in a bad state of repair.

In 1682 a new organ was ordered from Renuus Harris. Before the organ was completed Mr Paul Heath, the organist was expelled for keeping a disorderly ale house and causing the vicars to be “overgone with liquors.” The organ was completed in 1685 at a cost of £500 (Renuus Harris built organs at Hereford, Gloucester, Salisbury, Worcester, Chichester and Winchester). The Bristol instrument included the fine timber case, which we see today, and was placed facing east and west on a stone screen. It had three manuals, no pedals and no choir organ. The year which saw the completion of the organ also saw the births of two great composers, Bach and Handel. A Festival of St Cecilia on 22nd November 1727 possibly included the first performance of Handel’s music in the provinces. The Utrecht *Te Deum and Jubilate* were performed in the Cathedral. On 17th August 1758 *Messiah* was performed in the Cathedral – the first time in any church in England apart from the chapel of the Foundling Hospital.

From 1749 -1771 the Revd Charles Wesley lived in Bristol. His sons Charles and Samuel, who became eminent musicians, were born in Bristol. There is a record of Charles Wesley performing a concerto on the cathedral organ. John Wesley must have visited the Cathedral on a number of occasions. Having attended the performance of *Messiah* in 1758 he wrote, “ I doubt if that any congregation was ever so serious as they were during this performance. In many parts, especially several of the choruses, it exceeded my expectation.”

In 1763 the Dean and Chapter agreed to augment the salaries of the boy choristers: the two senior boys to £8 per year, the two seconds to £6 per year and the other two to £4 per year, provided their parents do provide another surplice each for them, so that they may attend clean at services continually. In about 1786 a separate choir organ of five stops was added to the Renuus Harris instrument. The choristers still only numbered six until the middle of the 19th century.

Dr Beeke was Dean from 1813 -37 when the organist was John Davis Corfe 1825 -76. There is a comment from a member of the congregation about Mr Corfe’s voluntaries after the Service. “The musical voluntary was considered by Dr Beeke to resemble too closely a circular of the organist’s to display his proficiency for instructing young ladies in the same art of charming the auricular sense: but Mr Corfe’s fame, as a perfect master of that celestial science, is too universally spread to need the aid of such expediency: therefore with more reason it may innocently be restored.”

Sydney Smith was a Canon of Bristol during this time (1828 – 1831). Things at the Cathedral were in a pretty parlous state – with absent clergy and Canons not fulfilling their residencies. A letter from Bristol addressed to the Archbishop of Canterbury dated 13th January 1834 appeared in a London newspaper, complaining of “general neglect and almost total abandonment of our Cathedral Services”. The writer says, “We have neither Dean nor Prebendary in residence for many months, and on Christmas Day the entire duty of this establishment comprehending prayer, sermon and sacrament were imposed upon one solitary minor canon.” This was the kind of situation facing Archdeacon Norris when he joined the Chapter in the 1850s and prevented the sale of the freehold of the nave site. He then appealed to the City for money to rebuild the nave. At the same time other renovations were taking place.

In 1860-61 the organ was rebuilt and enlarged by WG Vowles under the direction of the organist, John Davis Corfe, in consultation with Sir Frederick Ouseley. This cost £1550. As part of the renovation of the interior of the Cathedral, the organ was moved to the north choir aisle and the stone screen dumped in the ruins of the Bishop’s Palace, destroyed in 1645. Some had hoped that the 1685 organ case would be thrown out too, but fortunately the major part survives, although much mutilated.

In the Endowed Schools Act of 1869, commissioners were appointed to oversee schools and to reorganise their governing bodies. A draft scheme for the management of Bristol Cathedral College was implemented in 1875: “Choristers to the number of eighteen to receive free of charge such education as is normally given in Secondary Schools.”

As we know, Archdeacon Norris succeeded in his venture to raise money from the City to build the new nave, which was constructed between 1867-77 under the direction of G E Street, the two western towers being added in 1888.

George Risely succeeded Corfe as Cathedral organist in 1876. The Colston Hall had just been built and Risely gave weekly organ and orchestral concerts. He was also conductor of the Bristol Orpheus Society and in 1889 founded the Bristol Choral Society. In 1885 George Riseley had disputes with the Chapter and was dismissed. In 1886 he appealed to the Visitor against his dismissal and was successful. When he was reinstated, the anthems he chose for the first Sunday services were ‘How dear are thy counsels’ and ‘Fixed in his everlasting seat.’ His success did not bring peace. After many years of contention with the Chapter, which completely changed its personnel during the period, he finally retired on a pension in 1899. He was succeeded by Percy Buck who stayed for only two years. Percy Buck was followed by Hubert Hunt.

One of the first tasks facing Hubert Hunt was to sort out the organ. The nave had been rebuilt in 1866–7 and the choir was renovated by Pearson from 1894–1901. The organ was again moved and left in a dismantled state for some time. In 1904 a specification for a new organ was drawn up and estimates for rebuilding the organ obtained. J W Walker was unanimously accepted as the builder, but the money was not raised until 1907, when the magnificent ‘Edwardian’ organ was opened with a series of inaugural recitals over five days. Hubert Hunt was organist for over forty years. In about 1935 when the Friends

of Bristol Cathedral organised their first major festival, Hunt invited his friend Walford Davies, then organist of St George's Windsor, to take part.

When the Second World War started, the BBC moved 700 of its staff to Bristol including the BBC Symphony Orchestra with its conductor Adrian Boult and the BBC Singers under Walford Davies – “all with nowhere to live and precious little idea how they were to continue broadcasting.” The overall contribution to the war effort was mixed, but never in its history could Bristol have had such a range of talented musicians. Many of them had hidden talents. Adrian Boult was said to be the best grenade thrower in the BBC Home Guard Unit. Bristol Cathedral was at the disposal of BBC ‘Religion in Wartime.’ The Eastern Lady Chapel was turned into a studio and the Berkeley Chapel into a workshop for Walford Davies who broadcast ‘Lighten our darkness’ three times a week. Walford Davies died in 1941 and his ashes were placed in the Cathedral garden.

If Bristol became the centre of musical talent at the beginning of the war, what about musical talent in the forces? Professional musicians joined the services. Both Alwyn Surplice, who was appointed organist in 1945 and Clifford Harker, who succeeded him, served in the Royal Air Force. Alwyn Surplice moved to Winchester Cathedral in 1949.

In 1976 the free education provided for the choristers at the Cathedral School ceased when the School became Independent. There was a dramatic fall in applications for choristerships and a real threat to the treble line. The Choral Foundation was formed and an appeal raised funds to provide chorister bursaries.

In 1983 Clifford Harker, who had been organist for 34 years, was succeeded by Malcolm Archer, who went on to become organist of Wells Cathedral and then St. Paul's London, achieving considerable fame as a composer. In 1990 Malcolm Archer was succeeded by Christopher Brayne. By 1987 it was obvious that the Cathedral organ needed restoration, eighty years having passed since its rebuilding by JW Walker and Sons. The chapter secured the services of Nicholas Kynaston as consultant and the restoration was placed in the hands of Manders. The work was completed in 1990 and the organ was opened with a recital by Nicholas Kynaston and a few months later with another by Simon Preston. It is acknowledged as one of the great “romantic” instruments in the country, with wonderful richness of sound and tonal blend.

In 1993 Bristol was the third Cathedral to form a Girls' Choir from scratch. Unlike Salisbury and Wells, which were the first and second to form Girls' Choirs, Bristol, at that time, did not have young girls in the Cathedral School. The Choir was formed as a voluntary choir (SSA) for girls aged 11 – 18 from schools all over Bristol. It was a great success and has been copied by other Cathedrals in large cities. Since then there have been major developments at Bristol Cathedral School, first in having girls in the sixth form and then by going co-ed. This enabled girl choristers to be selected from the School in the same way as boy choristers. The most important development has been the change from Independent to Academy status in 2008. Bristol Cathedral Choir School, the first government funded Choir Academy, provides fourteen boy choristers and fourteen girl

choristers. As the education is free, instead of providing bursaries the Choral foundation now provides financial incentives to encourage choristers to apply.

At present the Cathedral Choir under the direction of Mark Lee, the Organist and Master of the Choristers, consists of 28 choristers, 14 boys and 14 girls, six lay clerks and four choral scholars. It is interesting to note that over the centuries Chapters maintaining Cathedral choirs have been faced with the same sort of problems, namely funding, recruitment, accommodation, maintenance of standards and occasional disciplinary problems. Bristol is no exception.

On average, Cathedral music takes up about one-third of a cathedral's budget. In the 1990s Bristol Cathedral received generous sponsorship from Nuclear Electric (later Magnox and then BFNS). All Cathedrals are trying to raise endowments of several million pounds to support their choirs. The Academy Status of the Choir School is a bonus, but money is still needed to fund the choristers.

The great tradition of Cathedral music is maintained in Bristol. Choral Evensong is sung daily during term time. The Cathedral is also a centre of music in the City, as it was in the past, and has links with the Universities and schools. There are many talented musicians and choirs in Bristol. The Cathedral is a place where all are welcome to make music to glorify God, sharing all that the Cathedral has to offer, in the same way that the Abbey and Cathedral have resounded to the strains of music through the centuries.

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