

NORWICH CATHEDRAL EX-CHORISTERS' GUILD
(Founded 1884)

Newsletter July 2011



In this edition we shall look back 60 years to the closure of the Choir School, an event which many of us still look on with sadness. Above you see the two classes, Senior and Junior, which were specially combined for the photograph. This shows:

At the rear, standing: Minor Canon Edward A Parr (Headmaster).

Back row of desks - from the near side: Keith Morley, Michael Flaxman, Roger Cliffe, Andrew Jarvis, Paul Rayner (partly hidden).

Middle row- from the near side: Richard Hunt, Edmund Ninham, Chris Foulger, Geoffrey Goddard, John Blowers, Michael Webb.

Front row – from the near side: David Ireland, Chris Gerrard, Keith Gascoyne, Barry Graver.

At the front at the board: Rev Father Donald Rae.

It is difficult to know where to start when writing about the Choir School. Some type of training school probably existed from the very early days of the monastery, to train postulants, who would later become monks. Bishop Herbert de Losinga certainly took an interest in the School, when writing to the first Prior. As time went on, the school expanded to include boys 'of a certain social status and ability' – however the then teacher, Master Hancock, was expressly forbidden to tout for custom to the detriment of the Grammar School (which was then housed in Bishopgate).

It was probably in the 14th Century that the School became a Choir School, when boy choristers sang the antiphons as a supplement to the men's voices. Evidence of boys being involved at this time is given by a 14th Century carving on one of the Misericord seats of a boy being birched by the (then) Precentor. In 1542 Thomas Grew was appointed master and teacher to instruct, feed, house and clothe eight 'singing children'.

The School itself was housed in various locations, probably including the Eastern walk of the cloisters (where you can find carvings representing a contemporary schoolboy game). It was also in a house to the south of the walk down to Pull's Ferry and also in the room above the Ethelbert Gate. It was finally located in the Locutory, south of the west door of the Cathedral, with the junior class in the upper west part of the cloisters.

'Recent' teachers of note include Dr Zechariah Buck, who served in the Cathedral for 70 years, Miss Bagge-Scott, who died in 1951, shortly after the School closed, Minor Canon Edward A Parr – headmaster from 1920 until the closure, and Rev Father Donald Rae, who are both seen in the photograph.

The closure of the School in 1951 was a sad event for most of us, and was brought about by the strict implementation of the then very recent Education Act. Basically the classrooms and their equipment did not conform to the new Ministry of Education standards and it needed its own playing field, and with just 17 boys it was 'too small'. The fact that everyone was getting individual attention, ensuring that he reached his full potential because of a pupil:teacher ratio of 8.5:1 did not seem to count in those days.

And so, in 1951, the formalities having been completed within the Cathedral, the Cathedral procession was led over to Norwich School Chapel where the Final Blessing was given by the Bishop of Norwich. The amalgamation of the two Schools was complete. So ended a School with a history of almost 900 years.

Chorister's memories. Of course, there is so much more which could be written, but now I want to move to choristers' memories – starting with the memories of Frederick Warden, chorister from 1912 to 1919. In a fascinating interview with Lionel Stone, of which I shall perhaps feature more in a future edition, Frederick talked about his time in the School – before Canon Parr was headmaster: "The old Choir School was a lovely place, in our days we really liked it. Our Master was called Brockbank, a north countryman who had come down from one of the Cathedrals in the North (Carlisle). He was a disciplinarian, but we rather liked him – I'm not sure what his qualifications were."

Frederick continued: "The old school room was lit by gas. There were three burners in the centre and a Tudor fireplace, which in the winter we kept going with coke. The coke was stored at the top of the staircase. At the top there was a huge supply of coke, which we used to fight with."

"In this top part of the cloisters, past the coke store, were the monks withdrawing rooms – five or six rooms which in our day were used to store all sorts of things – such as old organ pipes. We played with these too. Then, past these rooms, was a very large playroom in which there was an open ladder which had been screwed to the ceiling – to the beams of the ceiling. We used to play on this, swinging from rung to rung, sometimes missing some out. If you could miss four rungs, it was quite an achievement."

Ted Wragg also writes of this ladder: "attached to the low ceiling was a wooden ladder, about 20feet (6 metres) long on which we attempted swinging gymnastics." Ted further says "when I joined the choir (1920) Dr Frank Bates was choirmaster and Mr Brockbank was schoolmaster. I remember a very young Rev E A Parr taking over the Choir School. Among other things, he used to turn up in shorts on a Wednesday afternoon to referee our football games on a field adjoining the Grammar School field."

Soon after Rev Parr became schoolmaster, Miss Bagge-Scott joined him and took charge of the juniors. She was known to countless generations as 'Maggie' – although her Christian name was Adriana. She apparently acquired 'Maggie', because, for art classes, she used to bring in used soup tins to hold water – and the brand was 'Maggie'.

Ted Wragg continues "I cannot recall how many subjects Miss Bagge-Scott taught, but Canon Parr's range was extensive, including Geography, History, Latin, Greek, French, Algebra, and so on."

In 1947, Miss Bagge-Scott retired and soon after this Rev Donald Rae took over teaching the junior class. As well as his duties in the Choir School, Father Rae was the Vicar of St Giles' Church.

By 1950, Canon Parr would have been approaching retirement. At the same time Norwich, King Edward VI School needed extra premises. Contacts between the two schools had been ongoing since at least 1923, when, as Ted Wragg recalls, "the 'Ifiltration' of Grammar School pupils into the Choir School began." Ted's own brother was the first ex-Chorister to pass the entrance exam and enter the Grammar School, so moving in the other direction, from Choir School to Grammar School in 1924.

In September 1951, the Cathedral Choir School was merged with Norwich School.

Those of us who were taught at Norwich Cathedral Choir School remember our time there with gratitude and thanksgiving. We offer a thanksgiving that we were able to praise God through our work as Choristers.

With grateful thanks to all those who have contributed to this article, and in particular to Ted Wragg, Lionel Stone, Graham Jones and Paul Rayner.

We held our agm on 21st May this year. The officers and committee elected were:

Chair: Ivor Bartram, **Vice-Chair:** Tim Ashcroft, **Secretary:** Jonathan Burrell, **Treasurer:** Richard Hunt, **Events Organisation:** Luke dePear Brown, **Choir Liaison:** Terry Nicholl.

Committee: John Clarke, Isobel Gregor MacGregor, Adrian Knowles, Duncan Pigg, Nick Potts, Paul Rayner, Billie Robson. *Emeritus*, Lionel Stone, Robert Woodcock,

Please note particularly Jon Burrell's contact details, which are given below.

Evensong in the Cathedral followed this meeting, and in the evening we had our Annual Dinner in the Maids' Head Hotel. Rob Gillion ('60 to '65) was our speaker at the dinner. Rob was a professional actor for the first 14 years of his working life, before being called to serve the Church. He gave a scintillating account of his work, both in the United Kingdom and China. Now as Rector of Holy Trinity, Sloane Square he continues his interest in acting and broadcasting.

Next Year – 2012 – Our agm and annual dinner will be on Saturday 19th May 2012, and our speaker will be the Rt Revd Graham James, Lord Bishop of Norwich. We expect this to be a very popular event, and so will be asking you to indicate if you are planning to come in our next mailing – in October - with notification of the Advent Sunday event.

And don't forget this less formal Advent event. Since it is a buffet in the Refectory, it provides the opportunity for you to circulate and meet old friends – and make new ones.

Recent valedictions from the choirs: include Meg Barclay, Laura Butters, Natasha Grapes, Isobel Gregor MacGregor, Kathryn Harvey, Alex Little and Billie Robson.

Please remember that this newsletter is for you. A supply of ideas, information and suggestions for future editions is essential if we are to be able to continue it, so please think what you would like to see, and what you can contribute.

Dates for your diary:

27th November 2011, Advent buffet party in the Cathedral Refectory.

19th May 2012, Guild AGM, Choral Evensong and Annual dinner – Speaker, The Rt Revd Graham James, Lord Bishop of Norwich.

Contact us:

Website: Cathedral.org.uk and visit NCexCG entry via "Music".

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