

Oxford Welsh Male Voice Choir

*Celebrating
75 years*



'Congratulations!'

From Tom Jones -

" Congratulations to the **Oxford Welsh Male Voice Choir** on their 75th Anniversary. Long may they continue to bring the unique Welsh sound to Oxford and to all those who are privileged enough to hear them. "



From J Layton Watkins

General Secretary, Welsh Association of Male Choirs -

I would very much like to congratulate the men of the Oxford Welsh Male Voice Choir on achieving 75 years of giving pleasure to the community and entertaining people throughout England, Wales and overseas.

Oxford Welsh Male Voice Choir, a member of the Association for more than 30 years, has a reputation for enjoying an excellent rapport with all member choirs who visit Oxford and those who join them for concerts around the country. Their 'Afterglows' are well known!

As part of the 75th anniversary celebrations, choir members are on a week-long *Walk Back to our Roots* march to Risca, the nearest coal-field community to Oxford which was 'adopted' for aid during the years of depression in Wales.

My best wishes for this epic journey in July - a formidable task. Everyone will look forward to seeing you at the end of that week when you join in the '10,000 Voices' concert at Millennium Stadium, Cardiff.

I wish the Chairman John Prout, his committee and musical team, and all members of the Oxford Welsh Male Voice Choir a very healthy and most enjoyable 75th anniversary year.

***Cherish every moment. You deserve it!
Well done to you all - and many congratulations.***

*Message from the Chairman of
Oxford Welsh Male Voice Choir*

John Prout



I am pleased to welcome you to this booklet in which, I believe, you will find snippets of information each time you pick it up to read - such is its fascinating social as well as musical content.

The changes in our society during the past 75 years have been so enormous, making the survival and strong present-day existence of our choir remarkable!

It is a humbling privilege for me, as a Welshman, to be Chairman of the choir at this time and I pay tribute to all past chairmen, past and present music directors, accompanists, soloists, and, of course, the choristers, for ensuring both the choir's survival and success - not to mention our faithful supporters in general - and lady partners in particular.

Such a booklet on our history could not have been so interesting and informative but for the contribution of those actually involved in so many of the 75 years - in particular, I thank *Haydn Cooper, Eileen Hayes, Norman Sengelow and Malcolm Hookham* for their input - and acknowledge the work of our late Music Director and President Dick Bedwin who produced the booklet about our first 50 years.

Finally, I cannot thank *Polly Webb* too much for her dedication in co-ordinating, editing and designing this booklet. She has brought alive what could so easily have been a heavy-going mass of factual detail, and has helped us get a real feeling for our past - and our origins, especially. Being married to one of the choir's Welshmen may just have helped!

Please enjoy, like I have, a 'good read'.
Thank you for your interest. **Diolch Yn Fawr.**

THE *Oxford Welsh Male Voice Choir* owes its existence today to the many Welshmen in the depressed 1920s who 'got on yer bike' (if they had one) and left the valleys in search of work in London. Fortunately for us, many stopped off in Oxford...

Desperate for work and a future for their families, they found jobs making the very first UK cars of the century at the pioneering car factories - Morris Motors at Cowley and, across the road, Pressed Steel.

To the men from desolate mining areas without much green grass left to call home, Oxford opened its arms and hearts to help those in need, raising money for the Welsh town of Risca.

During tea breaks at work, the lonely Welsh workers would do what comes naturally - sing in the traditional unique four-part harmony.

It is a sound like no other - and it raised the roof!

***Uplifting spirits
as they
sang in the
canteen, the
applause
raised the roof!***

The Personnel manager at the factory and the local Cowley Congregational Church minister encouraged them to rehearse seriously and promote a proper programme to a wider audience.

Over a pint at local pub *The Cape of Good Hope*, eight, at first - calling themselves *The Octet* - did just that. They practised, hud-

dled around a fire in the church - and went on to win competitions, too.

For many years, still using *The Party* as their favourite famil-

iar title, *The Cowley Choir* (20 members) became the *Oxford Welsh Glee Singers* (28) - later adding 'Prize' to the title (to show off!) - and changed the name to the *Oxford Welsh Male Voice Choir* in 1978.



Much has been written since those early heady days when colleagues and management alike began to clamour for their impromptu - and, later, very well-rehearsed - renditions. And it is to those previous historians that many thanks must go, for not only recording the choir's onward and upward progress, but ensuring that the story of those foundations of dedication, commitment and camaraderie can still be enjoyed today through much of the content of this 75th anniversary booklet.

We are more than delighted that two people, at least, are still with us to help record and reminisce of those early days - our pianist, as main accompanist or deputy, for 69 of those years, Mrs Eileen Hayes (who married one of *The Party*) and our current President, Mr Haydn Cooper, whose uncle, Fred Morgan, was a founder member in the original *Octet*.



Eileen, who finally had to fold up her music sheets only through failing sight when she was a mere 85, is 87 this year.

Haydn, a 2nd tenor chorister for 62 years, choir secretary for 12 years, and invited to be President two years ago, is 85.

Eileen's first recollection of the original choir in the early 1930s was when, aged 16, she went to the local Temple Cowley Congregational Church (now Temple Cowley URC) "and was greatly impressed by this choir of handsome young men" who were singing during the Welsh Service.

"They were all listening intently," she remembers, "but I realised that many didn't understand the parts spoken in

Welsh! My future husband Arthur, from Pembrokeshire, was there - and he didn't understand a word.."

Eileen had moved to the area with her family from Biggleswade when her father changed jobs. She was already an accomplished



The original logo of the Oxford Welsh Glee Singers c. 1935

church organist when she arrived, and it didn't take her long to agree to become deputy accompanist - to her brother, Roy Wagstaff - for the Welsh choir.

She recounted through an article in the newsletter produced by the Oxford Welsh Male Voice Choir: **"We were nearly all unmarried and the boys would bring their girls to choir practice. We must have been a little noisy as, at a committee meeting, it was decided to ask the ladies to stop talking during the rehearsal!"**

"We were a young choir. I remember a competition

where the test piece was *'Arise from thy slumbers'*.

The adjudicator, summing up, commented - 'Here we have a young choir, not a false tooth among them - why, then, did they have to sing *'Arise from thy schlumbers'*?"

"At a Northampton competition, the adjudicator Armstrong Gibbs



Accompanist Eileen Hayes is serenaded by Oxford Welsh Male Voice Choir members, from left, Philip Gibbs, Norman Sengelow, Haydn Evans and Alfred Munday - on the occasion of her 80th birthday in 1996

"I have never heard notes sung more accurately..."

said our choir was 'one of the finest I have ever heard.'

He said he had never heard notes sung more correctly. We had sung *'The Herald'*.

Each year we went on an annual outing, hiring a coach (sometimes two) to go to the seaside - there were very few cars around in those days - a trip to the sea was quite an event.

"We rehearsed three times a



week and put on an annual concert in the Town Hall. In 1938, we went to Wales to compete in the National Eisteddfod and were very pleased to come second. The test piece was *'Y Delyn Aur'*.

When war broke out, things changed. My brother Roy joined the RAF and, after a while, I became the main accompanist. I was unable to take over immediately due to the imposed blackout.

"As this meant that no lights could be seen, the choir had to hold rehearsals on Sunday afternoons."

"There were no competitions and no long journeys any more, but we carried on, albeit as a depleted choir as many members were in the forces.

A concert organised



in 1942 by the

Ministry of Information in the Town Hall, highlighted the importance of women's work and war efforts, with several VIPs present - Leslie Howard, Roger Livesey and Eric Portman among them. "I remember we sang a piece, *'Dachau Anthem'* composed by a young Austrian musician while held in that concentration camp.

There was a great event in 1943 when Oxford organised a *'Salute to the Red Army'* - a concert in the Town Hall attended by several VIPs including Oxford's then MP Quintin Hogg (later Lord Hailsham). We sang several Russian songs and finished with a rousing Communist anthem - *'The Internationale'*.

Of course, the Russians, then, were our allies in fighting Hitler.

"The war over, continued Eileen, "members returned to the choir and we gradually got back to normal, though I don't think that we ever regained our former glory."

A great occasion for her and the choir was in the Festival Of Britain year 1951 - 'We went to the Royal Albert Hall to take part in a performance of *'The Rainbow'* - the true story of one of the little boats that sailed across the Channel to rescue men from the beaches of Dunkirk.

Sir Adrian Boult was the conductor and several famous bands and choirs took part .

"I still have the programme!"

"The Oxford Welsh Glee Singers went in for several competitions, the greatest triumph being to win three times in succession at Bristol. Dick Bedwin was the conductor - our hat-trick meant we got to keep the Cup!"

In the minutes of the choir's meetings in 1954, she was highly amused to read - 'In view of Eileen's forthcoming happy event, every effort should be made to obtain a temporary pianist...' The arrival of baby Richard kept Eileen away from the choir piano for only a short while - and she was back in time to accompany concerts on BBC Radio and a TV show in 1956!

Even the arrival of Baby Hayes didn't keep Eileen away from the piano for long...

One of Eileen's fondest memories of the early days was when, as an employee of the car factory, working on car seats - and, during the war, repairing aircraft when the factory turned over to munitions production - she bought herself, with staff discount, a Morris Minor for £115.

Current President Haydn Cooper was 16 when he found work in Cowley in the 1920s at car body makers Pressed Steel.

He remembers his uncle Fred talking of the sing-songs where he worked and how encouragement to 'go public' from the canteen into Oxford was the turning point for the original group.

"They used to rehearse a lot during the week and even weekends," said Haydn, "and when they started being praised at competitions, they knew they were on to a winner..."

"I joined, in 1937, nine years after they first started up - it was great fun!"

His wife Mair eventually joined him in Cowley from Wales and they had five children, but none joined the choir.

One of the highlights for Haydn of those early days was in the 1950s when the choir took part in the concert representing Oxford at the 'Top Town' national contest.

"We won - and even Newport was one of the entrants. It was all very exciting!"

Welsh singers and many songs in Welsh was not a problem for Haydn learning the pronounci-



Choir President, Haydn Cooper, 85, pictured with accompanist Eileen Hayes, 87, on the occasion of her retirement in August 2001

distraction of improved cinema facilities and the lure of the pop music scene - the 'Swinging Sixties'."

Flower power, mods, rockers and pop stars - it was an era for sitting back and being entertained - actively taking part in traditional pastimes was, for many, to be a thing of the past.

ation as it was the first language of his parents and grandparents.

And the group as a whole had no problem picking the best 28 (the maximum allowed under 'glee' rules) for a competition each time. It was the choir's 'Welsh only' constitution that was to be hurdle to attracting more members.

Our Welshness was our attraction, definitely," said Haydn, "but it became an issue when the numbers of choristers started to dwindle in the 1960s.

"I think recruitment was hampered by the more glamorous



While joint evenings of Welsh-only music and readings with the Oxford Welsh Society during this decade were organised and very much enjoyed by participants, it was becoming clear the choir would have to open its doors to non-Welsh members to survive.

The programme would still have mainly Welsh songs, but more modern popular numbers would be added to the repertoire. "It was a move that would ensure the choir had a future," said Haydn - "and the rest is history, as they say..."

A few years later, Haydn Cooper was to be responsible for arranging exchange concerts for Oxford's twinned-city 'Bonn Week'. A chamber music group from Bonn was among the party that entertained the people of Oxford.

The area in front of the Westgate Centre was named 'Bonn Square' by the Mayor, and Broad Street was closed for celebrations with German food, beer and bands.

Replies to his letters about arrangements were, naturally, in German and he had to

get them translated before he could report back to the *Oxford Welsh Glee Singers*.

'Songs really help break down any barriers'

But he took it all in his stride, arranging choir members' accommodation for the guests and ensuring coaches were on time to deliver them to concert venues.

It was Haydn's turn a year later to be a guest - back in Bonn for its own reciprocal 'Oxford

Week' and in a letter in 1975 from the Schubert Choir to Haydn and the 'Dear Singers of Oxford', he was reminded of those happy days by the German organiser:

- 'with pleasure the nice days in your home country and we tell again and again of the events during the Bonn Week in Oxford. Now we invite hearty the Welsh Glee Singers of Oxford to our festivities in September...'

We all enjoyed those fellowship times,' remembers Haydn. "Songs really do help break down barriers."

'The survival of body and spirit against impossible odds'

Richard E Bedwin, President until his death in 2001, was conductor during the 1950s and 1960s when the choir won many competitions and broadcast fairly regularly on BBC Radio.

Richard, or 'Dick' as he was familiarly known, was born in England but was 'qualified' to join - as his wife was Welsh. He researched and wrote much of the history for its 50th anniversary in 1978.



Richard Bedwin had written heart-achingly of the economic disaster of the 1920s in Wales that bred 'unemployment, squalor, starvation, strikes, lockouts, violence, brutality, bitterness and despair' which disrupted family life - 'and the survival of body and spirit against impossible odds...'

In the political and economic upheaval of those post-First World War times, the growth of electric power was the one factor largely responsible for the movement of men and machines away from the traditional Welsh family areas and assumptions that a son would always follow in father's footsteps down the mines.

Industries which, hitherto, were sited alongside the coal mines, could go, with electricity, almost anywhere. And they did - especially to London and the south-east.

Young men growing up in an environment of despondency and despair, had two choices - join the dole queue or leave home and look for work and self-respect else-



where. 'Some scraped together sufficient to buy tickets to various parts of the British Empire or the Americas,' wrote Richard.

'In doss or workhouses, they slept where they could - at least the lucky ones knew there was a job in the morning...'

Others sought work nearer at hand, in the larger English cities where new industries were beginning to flourish. Some travelled by train, others cycled or walked, sleeping rough or in work and doss houses en route.

'A job, a girlfriend, marriage, family life, putting down roots in a new society - all were recognisable safety valves.' For some, all of those were a long time coming.

Oxford became even more acutely aware of the plight of Welsh miners and their families in August 1928 when hundreds of former Newport miners and their families in Oxford sailed from Folly Bridge to Sandford Lock and joined in community singing with the Headington Prize Silver Band.

This show of strength in presence and voice did not go unnoticed by any means - and the people of Oxford responded to local and national calls for aid for stricken areas. Oxford City Council set up the 'Oxford Committee for the Relief of Distress in the Coalfields', appealing for food, clothing, bedding and money.

It soon became apparent that to 'Adopt a Town' would be the best possible way the people in Wales could be supported by English cities - and in February 1929, Risca in Monmouthshire, the nearest coalfield to Oxford, was adopted officially as the town to receive support and financial aid.

Richard Bedwin records that many young Welshmen in Oxford, usu-

ally 'of no fixed abode', regularly appeared before magistrates for being drunk and disorderly, having heavily imbibed to drown their sorrows.

'I hear that owing to your nationality, you are liable to get excited' - magistrate to young Welshman

Choir members would recall with glee the time when two young Welshmen were 'bound over' to keep the peace after a fracas outside the Palace Cinema. The magistrates' chairman told the court he was informed 'that owing to your nationality, you are liable to get excited.'!

Imaginative training schemes were devised to provide purposeful work, with farmers agreeing to organise one of them - they took in one or two miners at a time and taught them the rudiments of working the land.



Another 'purposeful work' idea was to be a cornerstone of the choir's history - Mr Bailey, Chairman of the Oxford Relief Committee, said: "It might be possible to form a Welsh choir which could give concerts, proceeds to go to Oxford's Risca appeal fund".

Meanwhile, back at the car works, one canteen song by the Welsh led to another. And in the local Morrell's pub - *The Cape of Good Hope* on The Plain, Cowley side of Magdalen Bridge - one or two would begin to carry on singing some of the melodies learnt in homes and chapels.

Even today - as many Oxford Welsh concert-goers know full well - the choir's post-concert 'Afterglow' entertainment in the pub soon has everyone joining in!

And so it was back then in 1928. At first, it was *The Octet* that started the sing-song, but 'Come to *The Party!*' was the call for many years and the name they indulged themselves in, even when persuaded and encour-



aged to take their talents to Oxford audiences, growing in numbers and adopting the name of *The Cowley Male Voice Choir*.

Morris Motors Personnel Manager Mr Hardacre, who conducted the Cowley Congregational Choir, and the Rev Whatley White in whose church they rehearsed around the fire to keep warm, were jointly keen to spur on the singers.

A well-known Oxford citizen at the time, Alderman Fred Moss, a native of Merthyr Tydfil, also encouraged the choir and gave financial support, eventually becoming President. But they wouldn't accept money from just anyone -

So keen was the choir to ensure their negotiating powers on jobs and conditions with management weren't sullied by any type of sponsorship, they refused company offers of financial aid

Relations between bosses and workers gradually improved, however, and many company directors were to become Vice-Presidents.

In 1931, still informally calling themselves *The Party*, members of *The Cowley Male Voice Choir* wanted a title to reflect their roots and uncontested glory - *The Oxford Welsh Prize Glee Singers*.

The title said it all as prizes galore were heaped upon them at numerous contests, but *Prize* and, much later, *Glee*, were to be dropped. The restriction on numbers governing 'glee' groups (28 was the maximum allowed in competitions) became something of a millstone when the choir wanted to expand not only membership but its repertoire, too.

The Oxford Welsh Glee Singers

Programme
1d



CONDUCTOR - GETHIN JENKINS (1926)

FIFTH
ANNUAL CONCERT
TOWN HALL, OXFORD - APRIL 7th 1935

SUPPORTED BY
MADAME JENY D. FEES
London - Royal Pioneer Square - 12 times Winner National
Established - Wales


EMLYN BURNS - Swindon - Junior
8 times Winner National Established - Wales - BEE - Artist
Gold Medalist - London and Provincial Concerts

HYWEL EMIYN JONES - Swindon - Baritone
6 times Winner National Established - Wales - BEE - Artist
Established - Wales

ACCOMPANIST - R. WAGSTAFF
CHAIRMAN - N. FITZWILLIAMS, Esq.
Supported by His Worship the Mayor of Oxford (Councillor
G. C. Pipkin)

PRESIDENT - COUNCILLOR F. E. MOSS

The programme that proves the original group of young men from Wales in 1929 done good - it heralds their fifth annual concert, and it's just 1935!

As early as 1933, a photograph of the choir appeared in the Oxford Mail (which then cost 1d), accompanied by an account of its victory in an Eisteddfod at Swindon. It was supported by eminent soloists, their fees being the subject of much debate at committee meetings. 

Glee numbers (unaccompanied score) were dropped and fewer songs with Welsh words appeared in the programme, as many from the valleys spoke little of their native tongue - despite such names on the register as Tom Bevan, Haydn Evans, Morgan Williams, Mel David, Tom Jones, Billo Roberts, Howell Thomas, Gwyn Lloyd, Wynn Jones and, for 14 years as conductor - Willie Davies.


Quickly making a good reputation in Oxford and surrounding areas - and packing out the Town Hall at its annual concert - the choir attracted much publicity.

Records show that the last of the annual concerts was in 1939 at St James Hall, Cowley, and were not resumed after the Second World War.

Rehearsals were twice a week, with extra dates fitted in just before important concerts or competitions. A required number of attendances at practices was dutifully recorded and members failing to reach these exact standards were reprimanded, some even dismissed.

In 1935, the constitution laid down that members had to attend two-thirds of all rehearsals to qualify to take part in concerts.

Committee members were not only active and conscientious, but diligent, too - in the early years, members would meet twice every month.

In 1938, the choir entered the Welsh National Eisteddfod,  in Cardiff, for the first time,

in the category for 'exile choirs'.

Under conductor Willie Davies, they came second to the Hammersmith Male Voice Choir, but made up for it the following year when they won - at the Northampton Festival!

It was this competition that Eileen Hayes refers to, earlier in this booklet, when the adjudicator was moved enough to say it was one of the finest male voice choirs he had ever heard!



The Oxford Welsh Glee Singers pictured in the mid-1930s outside Oxford Town Hall before one of its annual concerts

Being asked time and again to perform for charitable causes, choristers found themselves in great demand by many who realised the value of their voices to raise funds.

Churches, chapels, schools, colleges, old people's homes, hospitals, scout halls, sports clubs, working mens' clubs, YMCA hostels, the Salvation Army, Red Cross - and even gigs at Oxford Prison - kept them busy

**One gig
at the prison
didn't go
down well.**

**The song was
'Bless This House'
... it was a
big mistake**

The choir had always known that researching the repertoire to suit each audience was paramount to a successful event, but the choir's preparations for one of a number of performances at Oxford Prison in 1953 went somewhat awry.

The conductor was Richard Bedwin and he recorded that 'this time, however, the choice of music was not entirely appropriate'.

The choir was left in no doubt as to the popularity of 'Bless This House' when the soloist sang the second verse...
*'Bless these walls, both firm and stout,
keeping want and trouble out'!*

Accompanist Eileen Hayes looks back on that show as "perhaps not entirely appropriate, but they loved it! The soloist certainly had the prisoners laughing - that was his intention."

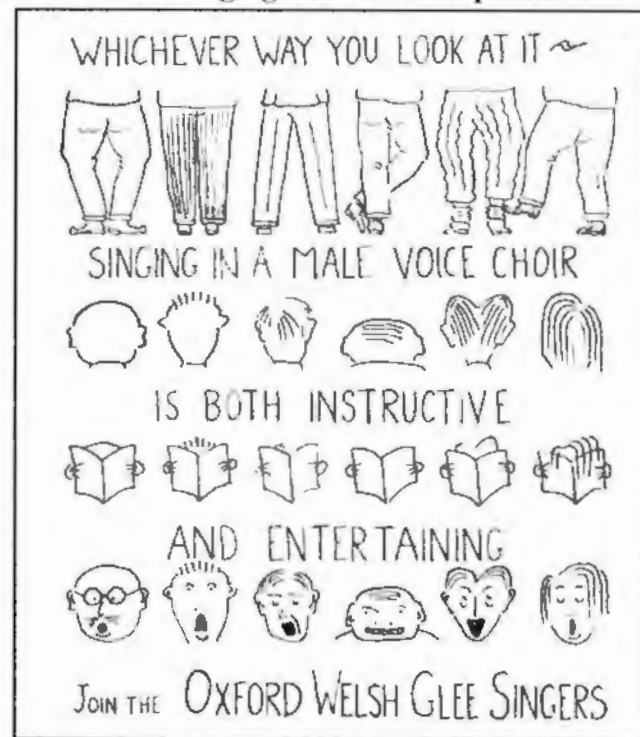


It was also in the 1950s the intention of *The Oxford Welsh Glee Singers* to be top dogs in the 'Top Town' national contest (as choir President Haydn Cooper recalls as a highlight earlier in the booklet).

The Oxford Mail reported that the evening 'was stolen by a group that has recently joined the team - the Oxford Welsh Glee Singers, whose unpretentious and unified singing was the most polished performance in the show.'

Haydn confirmed Richard Bedwin's recorded delights of that evening - 'Alan Course, a man of great wit and talent, instructed the group, during rehearsal breaks, with his own 'Russian' version of 'Sospan Fach'...

"If Alan's version had been in the programme," said Haydn, "it would have won!"



A recruiting poster from the 1950s

Collating a catalogue of music over the years is no mean feat for whoever is responsible.

On the 50th anniversary of the choir, Richard Bedwin noted that the then secretary Bernard Maliphant 'has gathered together 250 pieces of music, all of which have been in the repertoire at one time or another. Some much-loved pieces have been in for the last 50 years, some for only a short time. Some were learnt for a competition and then quietly buried in the choir library...'



Many are included today - the evergreen and inevitable Welsh folk songs and hymns, English part-songs, Celtic and culturally-ethnic spirituals, sea shanties, operatic choruses, sentimental ballads, carols and comedy numbers.

Welsh golden oldies such as the stirring 'Comrades in Arms', 'Myfanwy', 'Deus Salutis', and - included in a 1931 programme - the 'Soldiers' Chorus' (to name but a few) are still in demand.

While much of the choir's history has been carefully preserved in minute books with fascinating details faithfully recorded from 1935 to 1955 and from 1964 to 1975, a financial record dating back to the very first year has been unearthed.

A Mr Taylor had lent the choir £1 to buy music. Dated 21st January, the loan was repaid on 29th May.

'The conductor should receive a grant of £4 towards the purchase of a dress suit', the committee agreed in 1939

Total income in that first year of 1928/1929 was £5 13s 6d raised entirely from members' subscriptions. Expenditure was £3 4s 3d on music & postage!

Committee members agreed at a meeting in April 1939, 'that the conductor should receive a grant of £4 towards the purchase of a dress suit'.

Fifteen years later, the purchase of a suit was up for discussion again. Minutes recorded that 'Mr

J Evans kindly donned the specimen dress suit for members to assess its worth as regards style, texture. 'The examination was duly carried out and it was the opinion of all present that it fitted in every way the requirement of *The Party*.'

Richard Bedwin then added - 'and this was at £4 9s 6d a suit!'



It is presumed the 'accepted formula' of writing minutes in longhand was learnt by founder members on miners' lodge committees back home.

The minutes recorded unusual routine matters - criticism of low

attendance at rehearsals, pleas for punctuality, new members and proper deportment on the concert platform.

The conductor was criticised for his choice of programme and 'effusive congratulations' were

In 1967, 'the treasurer reported that funds had fallen low at this period due to the £50 given to the Aberfan Appeal Fund'...(original programme reprinted here)

ABERFAN APPEAL FUND.

CONCERT.

KIDLINGTON SILVER BAND.

(Conductor: G.C.Chesterman.)

AND

OXFORD WELSH GLEE SINGERS

(Conductor: Maurice Pethers, B.R.A.M.)

Accompanist: Lilian Hayes.

SUNDAY.

November 20th. 1966.

Programme: 6d.



passed to the treasurer for his accounts being in a 'masterly presentation'... the style and content all being set out as an example for future generations.

In minute books, scrap books and programmes, many prominent Oxford citizens in all walks of life were listed as being supporters of the choir in various ways.

Vice-Presidents included Capt Bourne, Oxford's MP before the war, and Oxford solicitor Bunny Col, who later commanded the 35th LAA Regiment. Civic dignitaries included Aldermen Fred Moss, CH Brown, Skipper (who first persuaded *The Party* to entertain the inmates at Oxford Prison), WM Gray, and Alderman Mrs (later Lady) Townsend.

The church was represented by vice-presidents the Rev Maurice Beauchamp, Father Whye and congregational church minister, the Rev Whatley White, who set up rehearsal facilities.

Scrap books and programmes show that many prominent Oxford citizens were supporters of the choir even in the early days

The university was represented by RHW Jones and JG Edwards of Jesus College, Prof Gilbert Murray and D Micklem.

The car industry was represented by Lord Nuffield who regularly appeared at the very popular

Morris Motors Music Festival, Works Manager Mr Woodcock, who later became managing director; and Messrs Shuttleworth, Wood and Cairns, directors of Pressed Steel.

On several occasions, Lord Nuffield presented a handsome shield to *The Party* for winning the Male Voice Choir competition.

Jack Thomas, closely associated with many members as first secretary of the Oxford branch of the Transport and General Workers' Union, was also a great supporter.



'A great fighter in the cause of fair play and dignity for the manual worker,' records Richard Bedwin, 'Jack Thomas later became a Vice-President of *The Party* and chaired several concerts.

'He was, in a sense, one of them, since he, too, had left his South Wales home in 1936 and travelled to Oxford to take up his new appointment.'

In the choir's 50th anniversary booklet, 'Fifty Years of Song', Richard Bedwin commented on how 'foreign' the city must have been to the young Welshmen, until their friends and families could join them.

But he marvelled at how the choir had thrived and survived when all around - the Morris Motors Band and the Pressed Steel Band (even despite some sponsorship) - had fallen by the wayside.

Demand for the choir's services, however, continued unabated and even after slogging away at the factory, with its deafening clatter of presses, members would

21 put in hours rehearsing twice or more each week in cold,



FIFTY YEARS OF SONG

A Brief History of the

OXFORD WELSH GLEE SINGERS

1928 - 1978

by

RICHARD E. BEDWIN



The choir's 50th anniversary booklet detailed the early days

Oxford was a 'foreign city' to the Welshmen at first...

badly-lit places, to pianos long past their prime.

The author, in closing paragraphs, warned, however, that despite the clamour for per-

formances in and around Oxford, 'commonsense suggests that **the choir must die...**

'unless it can attract young blood away from those buttons on the radio or television.'

Survival, reflected Richard Bedwin, would stem from the choir's Welsh origins. He then proffered that the recent election of a Scotsman as chairman was 'a rather symbolic irony' ...!

Richard Bedwin died while in office as President, just as the choir was putting together its newsletter 'In Tune' in early 2001. The choir sang at his funeral.

He was a conductor during the 1950s and 1960s when the choir enjoyed BBC Radio and TV broadcasts and competition-winning reached new peaks.

He had been aware and immensely proud that his beloved 'Party' had survived his prophecy of doom.

His history booklet was the subject of a feature on the choir in the Oxford Mail on 21st June 1978, next to this cartoon by Alan Course.



'You can't stop them singing!' ... the Oxford Mail caption said it all

The headline read:
'How glee spread among the gloom'

One of the choir personalities to be featured in the Oxford Mail in 1979, was Haydn Evans.

A bass-baritone, he was described as having 'a voice as rustless as the famous iron bridge at Merthyr, from whence he came...'



The article read: 'Like a number of his colleagues who spent some years in the press shop at Pressed Steel, Haydn's hearing was not perfect and this occasionally affected his intonation, but what a voice! If he had been willing and able to accept the discipline of professional training, he would have rivalled Geraint Evans.'

Even though for 45 years he had lived away from Merthyr Tydfil, which he called 'the Eldorado of Wales' - there was never any question where his roots lay.

Haydn, above, as he was pictured in the newspaper, joined the choir soon after arriving to find

work in Oxford in 1933.

He never had formal singing lessons, but his fine natural musical talent soon brought him recognition. His greatest triumph at competitions was winning the Morris Motors open festival three years in succession.

Judge George Thewliss, presenting Haydn his prize at the second festival, said - 'Give somebody else a chance!'

Haydn Evans regarded that as the biggest compliment.

It was in 1978 that the name changed, in line with other 'exile choirs', to the present Oxford Welsh Male Voice Choir

'and not before a good heated discussion in true Welsh style!'

- Malcolm Hookham, member for almost 30 years

Haydn's life was the choir, his forte being as a baritone soloist, and he would often complement a duet.

Haydn Evans was also just as likely to be found in a smaller concert party that entertained in clubs and residential homes particularly around Christmas time. He stopped singing solo before he left the choir, which was only a few years ago.

Thanks to Haydn, Norman Sengelow joined the choir and now, 24 years on, he has become so interested in its history, he is working on a system of filing the archives "to make it easier in future to write about our history!"

Norman, 70, had always enjoyed singing and when he heard from Haydn the choir was looking for new members, he wasted no time in going along to the next practice night at Cowley Community Centre.

"There has never been an official archivist, but I do think it's important for programmes, newspaper clippings and photographs to be kept in a chronological order and updated," said Norman, who lives at Headington. "I enjoy looking after the records very much."

In all the programmes he has sifted

through, one element of today's repertoire is missing - "there wasn't a love song in sight then - only traditional Welsh songs and hymns appear to be the order of the day..."

'There wasn't a love song in sight in those early days - but we often sing them now as a tribute to the women who support us'

But now, says Norman - "In a tribute to the women who support our members, we sing many numbers to convey the choir's feelings - 'Let It Be Me' and 'Love Changes Everything' being just two of them!"

He considers that this move is also a reflection of today's audiences - they like to hear songs they recognise.

"I would hesitate to say love songs were off the agenda in the 1930s because the members themselves were less romantic...!"



Archives show that Oxford Town Hall was the venue for many concerts for visiting choirs from all over the UK and overseas.

A poster in 1984 publicised Oxford Welsh choir hosting a 'Five Choirs Festival' at the Town Hall, with guests Basingstoke, Hart, Solent and Weybridge.

And in a music festival at South Woodham Ferrers, East Anglia, in April 1988, 14 choirs competed for the Morrision Orpheus Trophy with a test piece and a song of their own choice.

Oxford Welsh Male Voice Choir won honours, with 90 points. The adjudicator's remarks included: 'the quality of voices was apparent from the start...'



In 1986, a massed male voice choir concert was arranged at Fareham, Hampshire, one of many held throughout the 1980s.

Oxford Welsh won the 'Morrision Orpheus Trophy' - with honours!

Reading joined Oxford alongside Hart, Weybridge and Basingstoke, taking turns to host the event.

In 1988, a concert was held at the Old Mill Hall, Grove, where the soloists were three sisters - who still entertain alongside the choir even to this day - Mo, Maddy and Mary.

Musical Director on that occasion was Richard Christopher

and the accompanist Eileen Hayes.

The choir also joined in the grand concert in Wales in the late 1980s which was sung entirely in Welsh. Phonetic words to the song were written up for rehearsals and practised by those choir members who were not Welsh speakers!

Sydney Male Voice Choir enjoyed the acoustics and applause at Oxford's Town Hall in July 1988, when, as concert guests of the Oxford Welsh, they stopped off en route around Britain to mark the 200th anniversary of the first landing of British colonials in January 1788 in Australia.

Oxford's local newspaper screamed out the headline: 'Triumph for the Welsh!'

A six-choir concert hosted by Oxford Welsh in 1989 raised the roof of the Sheldonian Theatre in the city. Choristers came from Hart, High Wycombe, Northampton, Solent and Weybridge, to be conducted by Brian Tidy and the first-ever woman conductor of the Oxford Welsh, Mrs Maureen Foster.

*In 1992,
Oxford Welsh
was there backing
'The Pontypridd-born
singing sensation'
Tom Jones
at Cardiff Arms Park
with 7,000 voices
for a crowd of 25,000!*

In 1989, Oxford's Town Hall was again resounding to Welsh and international sounds when Oxford Welsh hosted a concert which included Gloucestershire Police Male Voice Choir and, from Canada, the Waterloo Regional Police Male Chorus.

A highlight for Norman Sengelow over the past 24 years was the whole choir's first overseas trip, in 1991, to Oxford's link town of Leiden,

Holland, for a festival weekend to mark that country's liberation after the Second World War.

Norman recalled that the choir was singing in a combined concert in the Pieter Kerk "and, later, I was taken back to my hosts' home - a large house-boat!"

He was also among a number of Oxford Welsh members taking part in the 'World Choir' concert in 1994 in Atlanta, Georgia; in Dublin a year later and then, in 1996, at Cape Town, joining the big open-air concert - with African choristers in traditional dress - to mark the retirement of Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

Members of the choir also went on second 10-day tour of Georgia in 1997, this time linking up with Wantage, Chipping Norton and Bournemouth.

*In 1993,
Oxford Welsh
was also there with
9,000 voices backing
Shirley Bassey in
'Hey, Big Spender!' and
Beatles' hits
in front of 30,000!*



Norman holds dear many fond memories of milestone anniversaries commemorating the Second World War when he sang in the Welsh choir inside the gates of Buckingham Palace during the 50th VE Day celebrations in 1995 - "I was lucky enough to meet Dame Vera Lynn and Sir Cliff Richard!"

And he was with other members of Oxford Welsh

in 2002 on the tour to South Africa to mark the 40th birthday of the Welsh Association of Male Choirs.

They sang on the pitch before the Wales v Springboks test matches at Bloemfontein and on that hallowed Cape Town rugby turf, Newlands.

The war-ravaged slope at Rorke's Drift was the venue for probably



the most poignant concert of

all, however, when the 100-strong Welsh singers commemorated the 1879 war between the Zulus and the Royal Regiment of Wales (see picture below).



Oxford Welsh member Norman Sengelow, far right, front row, pictured after the service at Rorke's Drift to commemorate the Zulu war there against the Royal Regiment of Wales

But wherever else he has been singing around the world, Norman Sengelow's recollections are always peppered with great fondness for trips not a million miles away - to Wales.

'It's always special for us to return to Wales to sing with the choir, Tenby and Narberth being the most recent, because there is always a special feeling of camaraderie...'



For further information, please telephone 01235 521307
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