

Midshires & Wales Regional Report

Maintaining regular contact with affiliated associations, which are usually run by a small number of individuals who, themselves, have other commitments and challenges, has, in the past, proved difficult. This year it has been doubly so because of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

I had been looking forward to attending a number of events of associations in my region this year but coronavirus put paid to any of the happening, with all AGMs and reunions being cancelled. I am sure that some will have held their AGMs on-line, as the Federation is doing; I know Peterborough and my own association at Warwick, are amongst those doing so but, for many associations, because of the demographic of their membership, video conferencing is not within their skill-set. Not everyone has access to the technology or has the desire to “meet on-line”.

As a result of all this inactivity, I have nothing specific to report from the Midshires & Wales region other than a general comment about the future. What has become increasingly apparent is that many associations around the country – and not just in the Midlands – are struggling to maintain their existence. Last year we lost Birmingham as their association decided to cease and I am aware of more than one association where their committee consists of two or three individuals, now in their 70s and 80s and not enjoying the best of health and who, for very good reasons, find it difficult to continue. A small number of places have attempted to encourage former members to come together in a formal association but have found it difficult to generate sufficient interest to make it happen. On the bright side, we have heard in the last month of a parish church that maintains a choral tradition, creating a former chorister association.

I do believe that former chorister associations can be – and, indeed are in many places – of great benefit to the current choir/choral foundation and, in these financially uncertain times, a strong, vibrantly active former chorister association (including those that include present choristers) is certainly something worth nurturing. We need to find ways to encourage all those who have been members of our respective choirs to engage (or re-engage) with their chorister association and do so with the support and leadership of the current Directors of Music and their teams. I know that the Federation will be there to support in any way that it can.

Nick Hodges - Regional Representative & Vice Chairman

Southwest Region

Salisbury Cathedral School has a Development Committee looking at the future of the School and its requirement for new buildings which is an expensive and long-term project. The School and the Association is in good heart!

Simon Earl, the Director of Music at Christchurch Priory Dorset said that they are looking into the possibility of forming an Choir Association. I then invited Simon to look at the FCOCA website for further information. Similar enquiries have been made to William Huw the Director of Music at Bath Abbey.

Stephen Milner - Regional Representative

East Anglia and South East Regional Report

It is a great pleasure to have welcomed All Saints Choir Association Kingston, Surrey as a new member to the Federation and region, in September 2019. All Saints has a renowned choral foundation and tradition, a noble pedigree, being the site of the coronation of the first King of England, Athelstan in 925 AD. Their inauguration AGM, reunion and evensong was unfortunately scuppered for some attendees by SWR failing to run a rail service to Kingston on the day. However, it was a splendid choral and instrumental event which sadly I was unable to attend, being abroad.

Disappointingly the pandemic deprived us all of another visit to Rochester for the AGM and unfortunately our Festival at Chester too has had to be cancelled. Hopefully next year's Festival will go ahead in October when we return to this region at Ely. The foundation of Ely goes back to 673. The Cathedral is a thrilling blend of architectural styles, with its unique lantern and a celebrated choral tradition.

The pandemic prevented an invitation to attend an AGM, however I moved back to Norwich from North Yorkshire and am ensconced in the Cathedral Quarter, so am more 'get at able' for the region!

Ayrton Westwood - Regional Representative

The North & Ireland Regional Report

2020 has been severely affected by the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic. This has included almost total restrictions on singing by church choirs and curtailed many former chorister association events. School buildings have closed so teachers and pupils have enjoyed (or endured) virtual lessons and experienced "the joys of" music & singing lessons over Zoom! The 2020 Federation festival was due to be held in Chester in our region, but it had to be cancelled. Moreover, most former chorister associations were unable to meet in person, so there has been limited or no recent activity to report upon.

With significantly reduced visitor numbers and hence income, some cathedrals have taken the difficult decision to lay-off or furlough staff including lay clerks and in some cases their Director of music. In Sheffield, the cathedral choir has been closed totally and we await news of how choir music will feature in the future vision of their cathedral. In June, the Dean and Chapter of York Minster proposed the closure of The Minster School. Fortunately, St Peter's School York has offered places current chorister pupils with the same choirmaster and will become the Choir School for York Minster. York Minster's Chapter had invested about £750,000 a year in The Minster School but this was considered too much.

Many churches and cathedrals have used technology to keep congregations involved, and I have very much enjoyed listening to services from my home Cathedral in Durham. Unfortunately, the membership of some of the Northern associations have shrunk to such an extent that they no longer meet. Recruitment is a problem for both choirs and for former chorister associations. Durham Cathedral will soon allow day-pupils to sing in the choir, not just borders.

Do not despair if your association appears to be folding. It may well resurrect, albeit in a different form more suited to the "New World" we live in today rather than the "Old World" we

fondly miss. Let's hope we can soon return to singing together, or listening to choirs in a cathedral or church, meeting up with friends.

It's not always "grim up t'North"!

Alastair Pollard - Regional Representative & Chairman