



Chair's Update June 2022



Federation of Cathedral Old Choristers' Associations

Time for change

Here it is. Our new look branding. We are not losing the formal title of the Federation of Cathedral Old Choristers' Associations, just changing the name by which we are known to **Once a Chorister**. As many will know, this has been the name of our annual magazine since 1988 and, we believe, expresses ideally what the organisation stands for. We still have some work to do to complete the refresh, such as update our website, Facebook page and Twitter presence. We also need to make sure the rest of our communications such as emails, letters, invoices etc., all follow the new cleaner branding, which we hope to have completed over the next few weeks. My thanks go to my friend, Chris Wheeler of Chris Wheeler Graphic Design, Stratford upon Avon, for his help in realising the new logo.

But why is change necessary? Every organisation has to keep up with the way the world around it changes. If it doesn't, it risks becoming a museum piece that fewer and fewer people are interested in. We may not always like change and would prefer to stay with the familiar but, if we fail to appeal to the current generation, we will eventually cease to exist. Falling attendance at Festivals and AGMs and offers to host these events, prompted the Executive Committee to think about what we needed to do to secure our future. We hope our new branding will appeal to the younger generation as well as become accepted by the older ones too and that our refresh will encourage affiliated associations to review their appeal to younger former choristers and consider what actions they might take to widen their appeal and make themselves more inclusive.

Our primary role is to bring former choristers in touch with one another, which we aim to do through the annual Festival, our regular communications and our website. We also exist to support choral music as a part of Christian worship by maintaining a close relationship with the Cathedral Music Trust (Friends of Cathedral Music), the Royal School of Church Music and the Choir Schools Association and supporting the activities of the choirs of our affiliated members where we can. Once a Chorister is about celebrating choristership and we hope that our new look will help us do just that.

2022 Annual Festival - Ely

We are all very much looking forward to meeting at this year's Festival, to be held from the **9th to 11th September at Ely Cathedral**. We are much indebted to John Marshal and the Ely Cathedral Choristers' Society who have had to face many challenges to bring this event to fruition. The pandemic may be largely behind us but its after-effects have been considerable, not least of which on the hospitality businesses which provide many of the facilities that go to make up events like ours.

All members of affiliated associations are cordially invited to attend the Festival and join other former choristers from around the country celebrating their choristership. Highlights of the weekend will include the **Festival Dinner** at which **Christopher Robinson** will be the guest speaker and choral evensong on



Friday and Saturday, the latter being the service when all former choristers have the opportunity to join the cathedral choir – Stanford in A and Bairstow, Blessed City, Heavenly Salem

Please do not forget to wear your FCOCA badge at all times when attending Festival events. Delegates not doing so may be charged entry to the Cathedral. New and replacement badges may be obtained using this link - <https://www.fcoca.org.uk/membership.html>. Please allow sufficient time for delivery.

The brochure for the Festival, including the booking form, is attached to the email with this newsletter. It may also be found on the Federation website. Please circulate it around your membership or point them to the website.

Follow the link on the home page at <https://www.fcoca.org.uk/>

Details of the weekend, as it currently stands are as follows:

Festival Programme

Friday 9th	Delegates arrive	
14:00 – 17:00	Registration	Cathedral Centre
16:00	Tea and welcome	North Transept
17:30	Choral Evensong	Lady Chapel
18:30	Reception	North Transept
21:15	Compline	Lady Chapel
Saturday 10th		
08:00	Communion	High altar
10:00	Tours	Cathedral Monastic Buildings
11:15	Coffee	North Transept
11:45	Organ Recital	Cathedral
12:30	Lunch	Own arrangements
	Ely Reunion Lunch ¹	Almonry
Afternoon	Free time	
15:15	Federation AGM	Cathedral Centre
16:30	Rehearsal for Evensong	Octagon
17:30	Festival Evensong	Octagon
19:00 for 19:30	Drinks	Monastic Barn
	Banquet	King's Ely
Sunday 11th		
08:15	Communion	High Altar
10:30	Festival Choral Eucharist	Octagon
12:15	Farewell Reception	North Transept
13:00	Sunday Lunch ²	Almonry

1. Federation members are invited to attend The Ely Lunch - details to follow
2. To be confirmed

Any changes to the programme will be posted on the Federation website and a further update will be sent to all affiliated associations following the July Executive Committee meeting.

A Diamond Anniversary

Celebrating choristership was what the weekend of the 21st/22nd May was all about at **Coventry Cathedral**. Former choristers from the Cathedral choirs gathered to mark the 60th anniversary of the consecration of the new Cathedral in 1962. Choristers from the choir that sang at the consecration joined more recent members of the boys' and girls' choirs together with lay clerks, scholars and members of Chapter House Choir and at least four former Directors of Music to mark the event.

The weekend began with a lunch reception hosted by the Bishop of Coventry, The Right Reverend Dr Christopher Cocksworth and Mrs Cocksworth in the garden of their home, when the Bishop welcomed the former choristers back to Coventry for their reunion weekend. This was followed by Choral Evensong when the former choristers joined the present girls' choir and choral scholars, conducted by Director of Music, Rachel Mahon. The introit was Almighty and everlasting God, Gibbons followed by the canticles in B flat by Stanford and Wesley's anthem, Blessed be the God and Father.



Rt. Rev. Dr Cristopher Cocksworth, Bishop of Coventry, welcomes former choristers to their reunion weekend



Rachel Mahon, Director of Music rehearses the massed choirs for evensong

was shown together with a display of choir related archives, photos and recordings, a showing of the BBC broadcast of the Consecration and the opportunity to hear Susan Hill's broadcast of 1971 featuring the choir David Lapine, Director of Music at the time of the consecration, had set out to produce.

It was a huge pleasure for my wife, Carolyn and me to join the attendees for the Saturday events and catch up with many old friends.



The Privilege of Choristership



Cathedral Music Trust's Ambassador
Alexander Armstrong

Actor, radio and television presenter and singer, **Alexander Armstrong**, was appointed the Cathedral Music Trust's Ambassador last year. Earlier this year he gave an excellent speech entitled 'The Privilege of Choristership' at a CMT concert held at St Paul's Cathedral, London, attended by the Trust's Royal Patron, HRH The Duchess of Gloucester. Though you may have seen it reproduced elsewhere, I believe this speech says everything that Once a Chorister stands for and I unreservedly reproduce it here.

"Your Royal Highness, my Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen: good evening! What a spectacular event this is and what a great honour it is to be a part of it. I am thrilled to be here. Moreover, I am delighted to have the opportunity to talk to you briefly about the tremendous privilege of choristership: the single greatest leg-up a child can be given in life.

Now, I know that sounds overblown and, yes, it is a bold claim but the more I think about it the truer I realise it is. Someone made the mistake of asking me during an interview the other day what the benefits are of being a chorister. Well that interview ended up overrunning by half of an hour and I was barely halfway through my list.

The most obvious benefit is the total submersion in music. This is a 'complete' musical education by process of osmosis. When you come to hang up your cassock for the final time at the age of 13 you will – without even having realised it was happening because you were just having a lovely time singing – have personal experience of every age and fashion of music from the ancient fauxbourdons of plainchant, to the exciting knotty textures of anthems so contemporary that the composers themselves might very well have conducted you. You will have breathed life into everyone from Buxtehude to Britten to Bach to Bridge to Bax to Brahms to Byrd to Bairstow to Bruckner to Bliss (and that's just the Bs I can think of off the top of my head). But you will know them, know them and love them in the way only a performer truly can. Choral music, to this day, has the power to move me so profoundly that I can lose myself in it for hours and just ride out the happy contemplations it evokes. It is a constant and lifelong tiding of comfort and – euphoric – joy.

Then there is the musicianship you absorb as a chorister, not just the music theory, the maths (the Italian!) all of which is very useful, but elegant musical phrasing, the projection of good diction, the shaping of beautiful vowel sounds for optimum tone, the careful precision singing a psalm, which can only be achieved by listening intently to those around you and blending your tone and rhythm with theirs – all of these skills and sensitivities become second nature and all of them have strange and unexpected use and resonance in later life.

And then there's the language – and I don't mean the salty badinage of the vestry but the liturgy you're immersed in, the psalms, the collects, the canticles – the poetry you get to sing (Herbert, Donne, Milton, Shakespeare, Hardy, Auden are all poets I first learnt to love – Christopher Smart even – by singing and performing their words). Your lexicon at the age of 13 is astounding, and your turn of phrase, taught by endless psalms and hymns, and not just the range of your vocabulary but your innate sense of the poetic. You will have come to know only too well the powerful quiet of an evensong, the sumptuous echo of a final amen sung from an ante-chapel but rolling around the clerestory like wine in a taster's glass.

And let's not overlook the discipline of choristership; the order it brings to a young person's often chaotic life, the friendship, the focus. Punctuality is one of the first lessons you learn: the ignominy of arriving even a minute late is something no chorister wants to experience twice. Then self-possession, decorum and grace are all attributes you quickly learn to fake – in the first instance – before adopting them for real as you gradually mature. But where else in the modern world is a child taught gravitas? Where else is a child taught, for example, to bow with proper dignity and humility?

I owe my entire career to my experience as a chorister. It was where I learnt to perform, where I learnt to use the full range of my voice; where I learnt to listen, where I learnt to write comedy, where I learnt to carry a pencil at all times – but most importantly it was where I learnt the wonderful truth that something exceptional, something as beautiful as anything anywhere, can be created just by you and your friends. I remember on a choir tour to Salamanca (ooh travel there's another benefit!) exploring the old cathedral with a couple of friends and finding ourselves alone in some sort of chapter house, we fired off a Boyce 3-part canon just to test the acoustics. A terrible, toe-curlingly self-indulgent thing to do but what a sound we made! And what a thing to discover: that we three – children essentially – carried between us all the components of something so joyous, so perfect, so complete. (And Boyce! There we are, there's another B for my list.)

I was lucky enough to be a chorister at St Mary's Cathedral in Edinburgh which had a good mix of boy and girl choristers as is now fairly typical in cathedrals up and down the country. And both there and at Trinity College, Cambridge where I ended up as a choral scholar, I sang with people from all walks of life (many of whom had their entire educations – at some of the country's best schools I might add – paid for by the music they had first learnt as choristers). I sang alongside some people of different faiths and plenty of none at all. And I am always heartened by the ethnic diversity in our cathedral and college choir rooms. So you see, you don't need to be a boy to be a chorister, you don't need to be a toff to be a chorister, you don't need to be religious, you don't even need to be Christian. Although as I say that I'm aware there is a certain spirituality that all choristers come to know well – something that lurks in the silences of a darkening nave while rush-hour traffic chugs about just yards outside the West door. A spirituality that is wrapped up in the ritual, the mystery and the beauty of this ancient tradition we have become part of. And I'm going to call that spirituality The Privilege of Choristership. That is what we are here tonight to celebrate and to preserve for the future, 'throughout all generations'."

Nick Hodges

Chair



Email: chairman@fcoca.org.uk

You are receiving this newsletter because either we have you on our database as the contact person for your Association or we have had some contact with you personally i.e. in the "Meet the Chairman" sessions. I would like to continue to write to you but if you do not wish to receive further communications from me, please reply to the email to which this newsletter was appended with REMOVE in the subject line.

Contributions to any discussions mentioned in the newsletter may be sent to me, Nick Hodges, at the above email address: or to the Honorary Secretary at secretary@fcoca.org.uk.