

Wednesday January 20 at Trinity-at-Bowes Methodist Church
Samuel Sebastian Wesley – a bicentenary appreciation by Dr Peter Horton

The following paragraphs on Wesley's early years are from a lecture given by Peter Horton to The Church Music Society in July 2000; the full version can be seen at <http://www.churchmusic.org.uk/articles/samuel-sebastian-wesley.asp>

“Born in London on 14 August 1810, Samuel Sebastian was the fourth child of the celebrated organist and composer Samuel Wesley, and grandson of Charles Wesley the hymn writer. Despite his distinguished lineage, the circumstances of his birth and upbringing were anything but conventional, as he was born to his father's teenage housemaid and spent his childhood under the shadow of strong family disapproval of Samuel's separation from his wife and liaison with a servant.

Yet although Samuel found considerably more domestic happiness than he had with his lawful wife, he was burdened by substantial maintenance payments and, with an ever-growing family and a seeming inability to spend less than he earned, frequently found himself in debt. Dark clouds of depression also hovered threateningly and in 1817 he jumped from a first floor window to escape imagined creditors and for his own safety was placed in a private asylum for close on twelve months. It was at this juncture that his seven year old son's formal musical education began with his acceptance as a Child (chorister) of the Chapel Royal, St James's Palace, by the Master of the Children, William Hawes.

Here he remained for the next eight and half years, singing in the chapel services and at the various musical societies and city banquets for whose music Hawes was responsible. Any fees the boys might earn invariably went into their master's pocket! Hawes' choir training involved the use of a lady's riding whip to impose discipline, but he was sufficiently impressed with his charge to choose him as one of the two choristers to go down to Brighton to sing in the services at the Royal Pavilion when the King, George IV, was in residence and later declared him to have been 'the best boy he had ever had'.

No less significantly, he also maintained contact with his former pupil after he had left the choir and as early as 1829 we find Wesley acting as pianist and conductor of the chorus at the English Opera House at the Adelphi Theatre where Hawes had charge of the music. In 1830 he was also appointed organist at the Lent Oratorio concerts at Covent Garden and Drury Lane theatres (conducted by Hawes), and there can be no doubting the importance of these early musical experiences on a budding composer.”

Wesley left London in 1832 on his appointment as Organist of Hereford Cathedral, then moved to Exeter Cathedral in 1835. After a promising start the situation deteriorated due to constant disagreements with the Dean. So in 1841 he moved to Leeds Parish Church and in 1849 to Winchester Cathedral and while at Winchester he became the first Professor of Organ at the Royal Academy of Music. With the appointment of a new Precentor in 1858, tension between Wesley and the cathedral authorities began to grow. Asked by Gloucester Cathedral to help them choose a new organist, he offered his services and in 1865 moved to his final post at Gloucester.

He was the foremost organist and church musician of his generation, and a vigorous campaigner for higher standards in cathedral music, but he was also a troubled, difficult character. Despite a career marked by conflict and suspicion he was loved by choir members and pupils. During 1875 his health deteriorated, he played for the last time in Gloucester Cathedral at Christmas and died in April 1876.

Dr Peter Horton is Reference Librarian at the Royal College of Music. His book: **Samuel Sebastian Wesley – A Life** was published by OUP in 2004 (and earlier this year they brought it out in paperback) so there was no one better qualified to lead this event. Some two dozen members and friends were not disappointed, enjoying a fascinating and informative evening, well illustrated with slides and recorded extracts.

Robin Coxon