

## **Girls' Choirs in our Parish Churches and the rise of the Parallel Girls' Choir (part 1)**

It was on Advent Sunday in 1967, at the age of just over 20 that I was appointed Organist and Choirmaster of the Parish Church of St Peter, Bexhill-on-Sea, for a trial period of time. Predecessors had always been at least an FRCO or BMus/MA, while at the time I was still an unqualified student. It is another story how after months of advertising, several rejections of auditioned applicants and frequent prayers in services, I came to be appointed, but here my purpose is to talk about girls' choirs in churches. I had, previous to my appointment at the Parish Church, been organist of the daughter church of St Michael and All Angels, Bexhill-on-Sea. At St Michael's I started with a rather elderly choir, but soon I had a choir of about a dozen girls, at which point the elderly sopranos retired, and I was left with an SATB choir. When I took over the Parish Church I had five boys. However, the numbers quickly built up into the twenties and at that time there was no reason to think of girls in the choir, as the front row of the stalls officially held 14 smallish persons, perhaps squeezing in two even smaller boys if necessary.

At the beginning of 1969 the men of the choir and I were aware that other choirs were beginning to take up residence at cathedrals around the country for a week in the summer. We thought that we now had enough repertoire to do this, but we felt we might not have quite enough men as this was not something the older men were so keen to contemplate; later this problem was solved. Around Easter our Rector, Canon Michael Townroe, came back from a holiday in south west Wales and said he had found just the place to stay in St Davids and that the Cathedral would welcome us.

At this point I became aware of the choir of St Davids Cathedral. It was a choir of boys, girls and men run by the Master of the Music, the very talented Peter Boorman. It had become mixed boys and girls due to a flu epidemic decimating the boys just before a Festival in the early 1960s but within a few years the girls dominated the choir. It was probably early 1969 that I heard the choir on the radio; it might have been a choral Evensong, but I am not sure. I was certainly very impressed by their quality. All this was in my mind during early 1969. Added to this was the formidable Miss Gray, Guide/Brownie Leader, who lived right opposite the church in Bexhill. Her ancient cottage was called "The Salt Box". I saw her quite frequently and each time she would bend my ear about how it was unfair that girls did not get the chance to sing in the choir. As it happened, by then we had more boys than would fit into the choir stalls and so I was not considering turning it into a mixed choir. Miss Gray had a particular interest, apart from her Brownies and Guides. Many years previously she had taken in a young lady who was in need of a home. In 1969 this young lady would have been about 30, but she was of diminutive stature, so Miss Gray believed that as she liked singing she would fit in with girls around the age of 10 and 12.

The Rector and I discussed with others the idea of beginning a choir for girls. At that time I had inherited a small "congregational choir" that practised the psalms, hymns and chanted canticles ready for the weekly sung Matins. It was simply designed to make sure that as there was no longer a choir in the choir stalls at Matins, the singing kept going. It was September 1969 that we started the Girls' Choir. We found a number of girls in the congregation who wanted to join and we decided that they should sing every Sunday at Matins. It was not long before the Matins choir agreed they were no longer needed and it was also not long before the girls had mastered the skill of chanting and had begun to build up a repertoire of unison and then SS anthems and canticles. While I had come up with the format for the Girls' Choir and

continued to be involved with their organisation and some of the services, I was very lucky that our assistant organist of the time, Alex Thomson, was willing to rehearse the girls and be their choirmaster.

The Girls' Choir grew and soon we had around 50 children involved in the two choirs. Initially I did not consider that the girls should have any reason to sing with the men. They had "their" service and we also found a way of giving them a week away in a diocesan house from where they enjoyed a week of activities and singing Choral Evensong in various village churches in the vicinity, as well as singing for a Sunday Choral Eucharist in one of the churches.

The Girls' Choir was now fully established. It did get the chance to sing Evensong at St Peter's on occasions, particularly when in the early 1970s, a few times each year, I would take the men and boys to sing Evensong in other local churches and some country parishes where the choirs had disintegrated or were unable to sing settings any more, and some where Evensong was no longer sung. The girls proved themselves to be very capable and over the 70s and into the 80s I always had someone who would assist me by taking most, if not all, of the girls' rehearsals. Alex moved out of Bexhill and in the following years the choir trainers were Cecilie Elsworth, Primrose D'Abo, John Moxon and Peter Hinchey. In my last few years at St Peter's, after giving up full-time teaching, I did run both choirs myself.

The Girls' Choir did sing a few times in our Diocesan Cathedral of Chichester, either by themselves or with the men of the choir. By the beginning of the eighties I began to change my mind about keeping the two choirs as completely separate entities and for high days I would put them together for a special Festival Service or for a choir concert, often giving each choir an opportunity to do something by themselves, as happened on a recording we made in the mid eighties.

I have one big regret as far as the girls are concerned. In 1972, while York Minster celebrated the 500th year of its consecration, we had a year of celebrations in Bexhill as it was our "Charter Year", 1200 years since the granting of its Charter in AD 772 by King Offa of Mercia. For the Charter Service, with bishops, local and country dignitaries and Princess Alexandra, I used only the boys and men. A few years later my view changed and I would have used both choirs together for such an occasion, but such was the spirit of the times that I did not even consider it.

It was the demise of Matins that changed my approach. The Matins congregation in Bexhill, as in other churches around the country, literally died off. We had a full church for the 9:45am Parish Eucharist and a reasonable attendance at 6pm Evensong. It was no longer viable to continue Matins and so we had to think hard about how to utilise the Girls' Choir as it had become strong and very useful. Meanwhile the choirstalls were full with men and boys. In the late seventies the boys' choir had settled to an average of 18 boys. With nine a side, if there were small ones they could just be squeezed in or a chair was added.

Without Matins I had to devise a schedule that gave one of the three choirs (men, boys, girls) a service off. To some extent the girls did lose out as they were not needed every Sunday, but I did start using them with the men on occasions and so they began to learn the SATB repertoire. The years were beginning to pass and by the mid to late seventies we had breaking voices from the boys and so new young tenors and basses were created; also the occasional alto began to appear and this gave us the opportunity to have a "Youth Choir" with these young men and some of the older girls. They sang services and gave concerts, mainly functioning out of university terms. As we entered the 1980s I found that the numbers in the Girls' Choir settled at around 14-16 and the boys the same, although we might drop to twelve boys in the

summer term. As already mentioned, the choir stalls and chancel were quite small and so those were comfortable numbers.

*Jonathan Marten, September 2016*

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To be continued in the next issue)*

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