

Girls' Choirs in our Parish Churches and the rise of the Parallel Girls' Choir (part 2)

I never did have a cathedral week with the Girls, but it would have been a natural progression had I been there into the 90s. My last cathedral week with the men and boys was in 1988 at Lichfield Cathedral. I resigned in 1989 just before a four-month Southern Africa tour for ABRSM. Previously, in 1987, I had been away for nine weeks in Hong Kong; I found that even though I left the choirs in the charge of good musicians, my being away for so long was not a good thing for the choir and so I made a decision to resign if I were to go away for a long period in the future.

During the 1970s Harrison Oxley, at St Edmundsbury Cathedral, bucked the trend by establishing a mixed boys' and girls' choir in a cathedral. This was acceptable until the early 1980s when a change of authority in the Cathedral decided there should only be boys in the choir. This was not received well by "Fred" who asked, "Why should half of humanity be banned from my choir?" I have found some evidence that before mixing the boys and girls at St Edmundsbury, they had existed as two separate choirs in the 1960s, but more information is needed to establish whether the girls were singing regular services. However, Dennis Townhill at St Mary's Cathedral, Edinburgh, had decided to make a change in the personnel of his treble line when creating the St Mary's Specialist Music School out of the then boys' choir school. In 1976 girls were admitted to the school with the same audition expectations as boys. Then in 1978 the Cathedral treble choir became half boys and half girls.



The Girls' Choir with clergy, assistant organist Peter Hinchey and Director of Music Jonathan Marten (fourth from the right)

As the Bexhill parallel choir faded away (it was combined and became mainly girls), in 1990 one was established at St Mary's Collegiate Church, Warwick, Richard Seal's newsworthy one in Salisbury was created in 1991, and in the same year Kerry Beaumont made the St Davids choir into a parallel boys' and girls' choir. Other cathedrals began to follow Salisbury, although I am not certain of the year of creation; I think that York, Lincoln and Winchester were among the first to follow suit. I was Director of Music at Enfield Parish Church (1995-2000) where I created a mixed choir for boys and girls. There were a few brothers and sisters in the choir. One mother put her son in for an audition for Lincoln Cathedral Choir, not knowing that there was a Girls' Choir as well. She was delighted to return and tell me that not only was her son to join the choir but her daughter had also, unexpectedly, gained a place in the Girls' Choir. So I lost two choristers in one fell swoop; I was sorry to see them go, particularly the daughter, who was a useful chorister.

In October 1992 Chingford Parish Church established a girls' choir alongside the boys' choir. This was started by Michael Emerson; he is still in post. He began with twelve girls but very soon there were over twenty in the choir. He continues to run successful parallel choirs for boys and girls. At this moment he has 50+ boys and girls involved in the two choirs. This is now my local Parish Church and when I am around I assist him by accompanying or directing as required along with his Organ Scholar and Organist Emeritus. The success at Chingford is due to the number of hours per week the Director of Music puts into administration, contacting parents and choristers and taking rehearsals. If you look up the Chingford Parish Church website, under music and choirs there is an excellent ten-minute video which has been extremely good in helping recruit new boys and girls to the choirs. There are a number of other parallel choirs, such as All Saints' Northampton, All Saints' Marlow and Croydon Minster, the last of which has its own story to tell.

I have corresponded with and spoken to a number of people connected with Croydon Minster, past and present, including the present and previous Organists. Unfortunately, nobody has been able to say with full authority, "This is what happened." I heard that there was a separate organist for the 9:30 am service and that the choir was known as the "9:30 Choir". Some believe it was a mixed youth/young people's choir that began in the early 1960s with the organist of the 9:30am service, and that when he retired/resigned Christine Phillis was invited to take over. I have certainly gathered that the late Christine Phillis was a remarkable musician and choir trainer who inspired the choir members and produced a wonderfully high standard. However, how and when the choir became a purely girls' choir and then a parallel choir with the boys' choir is uncertain, as I have heard different versions. One version relates that the young men disappeared to National Service and other callings until it was mainly girls without young adults, although I have heard that more mature sopranos have or even still do sing with the girls from time to time. The year for when it officially became a girls' choir has ranged between 1968 and 1972. Once it was a girls' choir there were never less than twenty in the choir and they tended to tour after Easter and in the summer, Truro Cathedral being a favourite destination, but to other cathedrals and venues as well.

To my mind, the way many cathedrals have found the resources to recruit a girls' choir and then fund and manage parallel choirs has been an asset to church music and equal opportunities. There clearly are more parish churches that run parallel choirs than I am aware of, although I am sure there are some churches that have no wish to follow in this newer choral tradition, but there are probably those who would like to do this but cannot find the resources.

It would be interesting to know whether any other parish churches maintained parallel boys' and girls' choirs in the 1960s. At that time I only knew of church children's choirs with mixed boys and girls, or consisting of boys or girls. If anyone knows of any other church that had gone down the route of Bexhill Parish Church before 1969, it would be good to hear of their experiences. It would also be good to know of any parish churches other than the few mentioned here, who have created a parallel choir. If other such choirs do exist it would be good to know how long they have been running and how it has benefited their parish, congregation and community.

Should anyone have information that would correct anything stated in this article or could add to my knowledge of the Girls' Choir in Croydon or any other place mentioned, I would be very interested to hear from them as I am hoping to document the development of these choirs in parish churches and cathedrals.

Jonathan Marten, September 2016

(Reprinted from Fanfare, the magazine of the Guild of Musicians and Singers, with amendments.)

In Part 1 of this article (September 2019) the name of Cecilie Elsworth was wrongly printed as Cecilie Unsworth. We apologise for the error. Ed.

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