

Our Rich History

1960s - 1970s

If the first great period in the Choir's history was played out at a national level, then the second flowering took place in a truly **international scale**.

During the 30's the Choir had enjoyed a string of successes at Britain's top musical competition for male voices - the Blackpool Festival. For a golden period during the 60's and 70's the Choir triumphed over worldwide competition at the International Eisteddfod at Llangollen.

The Choir sang nine times at this prestigious event and established a record of victories that has not been matched since by any other male voice choir.

We won four first prizes (with a hat-trick of wins in 1960, 1961 and 1962), three seconds and one third, with time also to take first prize at the inaugural Teesside International Industrial Eisteddfod in 1966.



Several of these prizes were won with the settings of psalms composed especially by George Stead for that purpose.

Truly outstanding singing and musical direction

The chief opposition during these years came from University choirs from the United States, the teachers' choirs from the Eastern European countries (then behind the Iron Curtain) of Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia and Poland and some excellent choirs from Italy.

The Colne Valley choir was so outstanding during these years - truly Europe's leading male voice choir - that only international competition was adequate. Excellence came from all parts - especially rich basses, warm baritones and a splendidly robust set of first tenors, plus what George Stead called the "salt of the earth", the often neglected second tenors.

A shocking blow

George Stead died suddenly in 1968. He had been in his vigorous prime, conducting other choirs such as the Huddersfield Vocal Union and being chorus master of the Bradford Festival Chorus (where he would always take his place among the basses for the actual performance). He had recently returned to the Blackpool Festival, where he won the bass solo competition.



He had been awarded the MBE for his services to music, when, out of the blue, he died in his chair at home at the early age of 67, to the shock and horror of the Choir.

His funeral, at his beloved Golcar Baptist Chapel, where he had been choirmaster for almost the whole of his adult life, was a moving affair, with many of the Colne Valley men in tears singing the chorus from Finlandia.

In despondency, there was serious consideration given to winding up the Choir, some members feeling that we had no future without his guidance. Fortunately, others knew we would find a way forward.

George' special talents

One was always aware of how far ahead George was in his vision of what might be achieved by the Choir - and how far short of that vision it fell. Tone (especially consistency of tone from top to bottom of the Choir), blend and tuning were his specialities. He used very small gestures when conducting, aiming to get the Choir to feel and act with unanimity. He was an amateur and his amateur taste could sometimes irritate adjudicators. The Choir had bad results as well as many good ones and George was always philosophical about results, whether winning or losing.

George Stead came at the end of the amateur tradition - the end of the time when opportunities for even a really talented musician to make a career in music were very limited indeed and for a chorus-master virtually non-existent.

A successor appointed



A successor, **John Gulley**, was appointed in 1969; a man in a more modern mould. Not a Yorkshireman but from the West Country, John had studied law but switched to French horn and conducting. At the time of his appointment he was a senior lecturer in music at the Huddersfield Polytechnic (now University).

An able all-round musician, equally at home with bands and orchestras, John held the Choir together very well.

Under him it reached its greatest size, with 92 singing members. Competition successes continued, notably one outstanding first prize at the Cardigan Eisteddfod in 1971 and another at the Pontrhydfendigaid Eisteddfod in 1977, plus two entries at Llangollen, which yielded second and third prizes. Commercial recordings, some with excellent brass accompaniments arranged by John, continued to be made.



Repeated visits to and from Solingen in Germany and to the non-competitive music festival in Besancon in France in 1975 were made.

And still the very high level of achievement continued - even if the sheer competitive supremacy of the Sixties had faded somewhat.



Ronald Hill, seen front right, picnicking on tour in France in 1975. Behind him, future choir chaplain, John Radcliffe, pours the wine.

In 1978 Ronald Hill was made the first ever Life President of the Choir for his outstanding services: firstly as a singing member then, as Secretary 1945-1953, and as President 1953-1958 and 1964-1978.



Keith Swallow, John Wood (organist), Dorothy Ross (soloist) and John Gulley 1976

After eleven years John Gulley (right) decided that musically he had done all he could and tendered his resignation in 1980, which was accepted with regret.

“Through all this time from 1957 to the present, the single most brilliant asset of the Choir has been its accompanist, Keith Swallow, of national and international renown. When Keith puts the first note down the adjudicators sit up and take notice, knowing that here is something exceptional”.

His ongoing contribution to the success of the Choir is immeasurable.