

# Our Rich History

## 1980s - 1990s

### Many Changes

In late 1980 Nicholas Powell took over the baton from John Gulley. This heralded an innovative three years of groundwork that was to serve the Choir well in later years.

The early 1980s were relatively lean years in terms of membership numbers but nonetheless, Nick led the Choir in July '81 to a 2<sup>nd</sup> prize at Llangollen.



Nick Powell & Dennis O'Neill (President Ron Hill on the right)

It was Nick who was conducting during a 1983 Tour to a choral competition at Lindenholzhausen, Germany, with a festival marquee temperature rising well over 90 degrees. It was like singing in an oven!

Nick led the Choir in some fine concerts; not least with Welsh operatic tenor and TV star, Dennis O'Neill.

However, Nick's increasing commitments as a senior voice tutor at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester caused him to stand down in 1983 and it was John Gulley who returned for a further six year spell.

Also in 1983 a consultant surgeon at Huddersfield Royal Infirmary, Geoffrey A. Bunch, became Choir President. Not only were his hands safe and sound on patients in the operating theatre, they were also used extremely capably on the piano in the concert hall and rehearsal room. On several occasions, the Choir took advantage of his musical talents, both in concert and competition, when Keith Swallow was unavailable.



1988, Dennis O'Neill again with Solingen Choir on an exchange visit from Germany



**John Gulley returns to the Choir in 1983**

Membership numbers rose again during this period, due not least to the attractions of a singing tour in California in 1984. Many friendships were established with eleven concerts being performed in a 15 day tour, travelling in two Greyhound coaches with overnight accommodation being provided by American families in ten Napa Valley stops from San Francisco to Los Angeles.

One memory, which will never be forgotten, while the Choir were in the United States, was the earthquake, the most severe in the area since 1911.



One Choir member, Ken Denton, recalls –

*“On Good Friday 1984, a Choir of 45, some with their wives, flew from Heathrow to San Francisco for a fortnight’s concert tour, staying overnight with families from churches. Having had a tour of San Francisco and daily concerts en-route, we had journeyed a hundred miles south to our Day 4 destination in Martinez.*

*From a mid-morning civic reception we were allocated to our overnight host. With a fellow second tenor I was introduced to Shaaron - a single parent with a teenage son. Her employment was as secretary to the town judge. Needing to make preparations for lunch, Shaaron suggested that we might like to visit the nearby Viano Winery. With little ado we were invited to sample the rows of wines, from light whites to dark reds, which we did with great pleasure.*

*The half-mile walk back took us to join Shaaron and neighbour, Dot, at a table sagging under the weight of a large turkey. Sharing our winery purchases as we went along, we were abruptly disturbed at 1.16pm, when the world started to do odd things. My first thought was that the wine must have caught up with me, so I was relieved when Shaaron said, “Gee, Dot, we’re having a quake,”*

*We were led to stand under door frameworks, one of a house’s strongest quake-resistant points. As swinging lampshades settled down and cups stopped rattling, television and radio announced that the quake was centred 30 miles away on the San Andreas Fault; it had lasted for ten seconds and, at 6.2 on the Richter scale, was the strongest for over 60 years.”*

That same evening the local Martinez newspaper’s review of the previous evening’s concert was headed **“English Choir’s Sonorous Tone Moved the Earth”**.

**A rare visitor stops by to sing ‘Pratty Flowers’.**



**Former Prime Minister and Huddersfield-born MP, Harold Wilson joins a rehearsal 1984**

## **A new conductor arrives; another new era starts**



In 1989, auditions for a new Musical Director took place. Colne Valley took a chance on a young Oxford University graduate, Thom Meredith, just 23 year old. It turned out to be one of the Choir's wisest decisions.

From the outset his affable personality, patience and musicianship established a rapport with Choir members, which soon led on to high respect that has grown over the years, both within the Choir and in ever widening musical circles. At the time, Thom was a member of the music staff of Colne Valley High School and he subsequently went on to develop his career as Head of the Kirklees Music School.

Thom's great contribution to young people's music education and to their enjoyment of music continues to this day. Through this enthusiasm Thom has created many links between the mature men of the Choir and with youth and school groups across Kirklees, in turn bringing opportunities for joint performance and great pleasure for both the young and the old participants.

### **A new run of competition success**

In competition the Choir, regaining former standards under Thom's guidance, enjoyed a new run of successes. A top ranking achievement in 1993 was the Choir's success in winning the Northern Male Voice Choir Championships in Newcastle, closely followed by the National Male Voice Championship title in Huddersfield. Three years later the Choir became the first male voice group to take the overall Prize Winner's Challenge trophy for all Choirs competing in the Mrs Sunderland Musical Festival.

During this time Colne Valley also reached the televised final stages of the Sainsbury's Choir of the Year Competition. In 1997 and in its 75th anniversary year the Choir came second at the Llangollen International Eisteddfod but greater honours were to come the following year.

In 1998 1<sup>st</sup> prize was achieved first at the Pontrhyfendigaid Eisteddfod in May and then 1<sup>st</sup> prize at Llangollen in July.

We topped that with 1<sup>st</sup> prize at the National Male Voice Choir Championship at Rhyl in October.

Colne Valley thus became the only Choir to accomplish the superb double of the Male Voice Choir of the World and the National Male Voice Choir Champions in the same year.



In 1999 the Male Voice Choir of the World title was successfully defended with yet another win at Llangollen.

In 2000 the Choir had to be satisfied with 4th place. However, in four consecutive years at Llangollen competing against UK and international choirs, Colne Valley's honours sheet read - 1997 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1998 1<sup>st</sup>, 1999 1<sup>st</sup>, 2000 4<sup>th</sup> almost replicating the successes of the early 60s.

## It wasn't all competition

During the 90's the Choir went on several European tours.

1992 to newly-liberated Czechoslovakia



1994 to Germany again



...and to Cork in Ireland in 1996



### **Continually served by brilliant accompanists**

In 1997, the Choir celebrated its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary. By happy coincidence this year also marked for Keith the completion of 40 years with the Choir. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, we were privileged in continuing to enjoy Keith's brilliance as accompanist and regular soloist. Notwithstanding the demands for his services as soloist and accompanist throughout the country, not to mention broadcasting and recording, Keith maintained unwavering loyalty to the Choir.

One member summed up the Choir's feelings when he said - "I get more than the value of my subscriptions just from listening to Keith".



In the later years of this period Philip Baxter became Keith's deputy as rehearsal accompanist, allowing his predecessor, Brian Shaw, to assume the position of deputy conductor.

