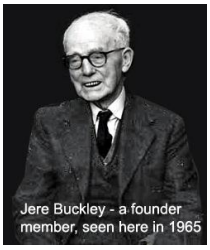
Our Rich History 1920s – 1930's

Founding


Jere Buckley - a founder member, seen here in 1965

The Colne Valley Male Voice Choir was officially formed at a meeting held at Slaithwaite Liberal Club on May 8th 1922.

A year earlier, Mr Hervey Haigh, secretary of the Colne Valley Mixed Vocal Union, conducted by Jere Buckley, had got together with friends from the valley to make up a male voice group meeting on Friday evenings.

The Choir which sprang from this background in 1922 elected to rehearse on Monday evenings: our practice to the present day. Another resolution at the first meeting was that the Choir should compete in an open air music festival at Gomersal on July 15th 1922. Conducted by Hervey Haigh, the Choir was placed fourth. The Choir was soon giving concerts at local places of worship, in the Liberal Hall and in Marsden Park.

'What the Sun caught in Slaithwaite Spa'
Probably the earliest photograph of Colne Valley Male Voice Choir, circa 1922: the year it was founded.

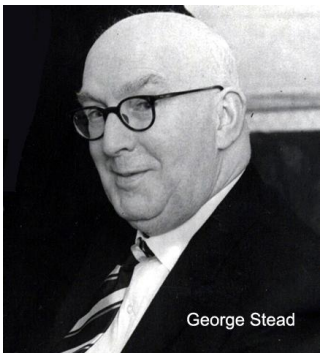
George Stead as a young Choir member is seen front row third from left. Percy Fairbanks front row extreme right.

Almost disbanded

At the annual meeting on January 1st 1923, the Choir came close to disbanding, but a decision was held over until three outstanding concert engagements had been fulfilled.

This delay brought a change of heart and three weeks later it was decided to carry on, with Mr Clarence Roberts as president. Rehearsals continued at the Liberal Club and on July 7th that year the Choir took second prize at Thornhill (Dewsbury) and the following week won first prize (the princely sum of £7.00) and the conductor's baton at Batley.

A new conductor


George Stead

A year later, under deputy conductor George E Stead, the Choir was awarded first prize and the challenge cup at West Ardsley, Leeds. This partnership between conductor and Choir was cemented on September 1st 1924, when Mr Stead was appointed conductor, and by the time of his death, 44 years later, Mr Stead had conducted the Choir in scores of concerts and contests, winning over 50 first prizes.

First broadcast

The years 1931 and 1932 were lean times in competitions, but in January 1932 the members travelled to the BBC Studios in Manchester for the Choir's first ever live broadcast. Competing in the Ikley Musical Festival of 1934, the Choir tied for first place with that famous Lancashire choir, Colne Orpheus. The two choirs were to have some real battles, but off stage were great friends.

First prizes

Four first prizes in 1935 included the achievement of another of Colne Valley's ambitions by beating the Holme Valley Male Voice Choir under their highly reputed conductor, Irving Silverwood. Holme Valley was at that time probably the best male voice choir in the country. The distinguished adjudicating panel - Dr Armstrong Gibbs, Sir Hugh Roberton, Dr Herbert Howells and Dr Staton - really sat up and took notice when, instead of having a chord struck on the piano as all other competitors had done, George Stead quietly sang the chord out of his head. The Blackpool Musical Festival took place a week later and again Holme Valley had to settle for second place after Colne Valley. Colne Valley went on to win at Blackpool for six years running - a record that still stands to this day.

In 1936 the Choir competed in musical festivals at Huddersfield, Southport, Ilkley, Lytham, Blackpool and Sheffield and won them all. Blackpool test pieces in 1937 included Wagner's "The Holy Supper of the Apostles" - an extremely difficult work, but one which George Stead summed up as "just up our street". Much has been written about this 64-page test-piece with first and second choirs, the Apostles and voices from above. It is a truly monumental work. When it came to the day, several choirs withdrew, owing to the difficulties of the piece. Colne Valley won clearly. On behalf of the adjudicators, Dr Howells said they could not understand how any choir could maintain pitch throughout the first 40-page unaccompanied section.

Audiences go wild!

On Sunday, November 28th 1937, hundreds were turned away from two musical services held at Golcar Baptist Church. "The Apostles" was the attraction which caused the chapel to be packed to what was reported to be a dangerous capacity. It was the first time ever that spontaneous applause had been heard at the church.

A few weeks later in February many were also turned away from Huddersfield Town Hall when the 50th Mrs Sunderland entries included Colne Valley, Holme Valley, Colne Orpheus and Nelson Arion. Though gaining 90 marks in the preliminary round, Nelson did not get into the final and it was Colne Valley who won by five points over Holme Valley and six points over Colne Orpheus. Dr Tysoe, the adjudicator, said that the singing of Colne Valley was "stupendous".

A run of 10 first prizes in succession was ended in May 1938, when old friends and rivals, Colne Orpheus, under the direction of Luther Greenwood, narrowly beat Colne Valley into second place. The following month at Lytham, the Choir won first prize, the Challenge Supreme and the Kenham Cup for the third year in succession.

They went one better on October 31st, by winning the Blackpool Festival for the fourth successive year. Marks of 93, 95, 94 and 95 meant that they beat Felling by 20 points.

Perhaps surprisingly, it was not until March 1939 that the Choir gave the first concert of their own promotion in Huddersfield Town Hall, with the well known baritone Denis Noble as soloist and Charles Ellam as solo pianist. The last big competitive success of the decade came on May 13th 1939 in the new style North of England Musical Tournament in the City Hall, Newcastle. After Felling had been beaten by five points, the adjudicator was particularly enthusiastic about Colne Valley's singing of "Sing Unto God" (Judas Maccabeus), saying that never before had he given 95 marks in a competition.

War is declared

The Choir held a General Meeting on September 5th 1939, just two days after the Second World War had been declared. It was decided, unanimously, that the Choir would carry on. Competitions were suspended and, of course, the membership was much affected by the priorities of the national war effort but, nonetheless, the Choir took part in many wartime charity concerts locally and in Leeds, Bradford and Ilkley, raising considerable sums of money for a variety of causes.

War Time broadcast under Deputy Conductor, Harold Lumb – George Stead having been 'called up'