

A Short History of Chepstow Choral Society.

CHEPSTOW CHORAL SOCIETY celebrates its 35th Anniversary season in 2014/15. Its origins began in September 1979 when Anne Martin, being unsuccessful in finding a mixed choir when she moved to Chepstow, gathered together a nucleus of local enthusiasts with varying abilities. The group took the name "The Kingsmark Singers" and went on to perform its first programme of Christmas carols in December of that year.

During the next 8 years, the choir developed and performed such diverse programmes as "*Messiah*", Faure's *Requiem*, Vivaldi's "*Gloria*", Coleridge-Taylor's "*Hiawatha's Wedding Feast*", and the Flanders & Horowitz "*Captain Noah and his Floating Zoo*", as well as concerts with the Welsh Guards, Victorian Evenings and others. In 1990, after some short changes of leadership, Jeremy Winston took over, incorporating the Kingsmark Singers with the St Arvans Choir, and the group was re-named Chepstow Choral Society. The choir continued to progress, performing several concerts with orchestra, until 1993, when Robin Stubbs became conductor. By this time a committee had been formed to run the Society, with a constitution and responsibility for concert budgeting. Under Robin's direction, the choir widened its range and scope considerably, and "new" 20th century works were successfully attempted, including John Rutter's *Gloria* and *Magnificat*, and Andrew Carter's *Benedicite*. The choir participated in the nationwide BT Voices for Hospice performances of *Messiah*, with full orchestra and large choir at St Mary's Church, Chepstow, to a capacity audience. This was one of two concerts which raised over £3500 each for charity – when Graham Bull took over as Musical Director in 1998, his first concert with the choir was the second of these charity concerts, Mozart's *Requiem* for the National Meningitis Trust.

The years since 1998 have seen the choir increasingly perform more ambitious works with orchestra, instrumental ensembles, organ, and using young professional soloists. As well as re-visiting certain works (Faure's *Requiem*, Rutter's *Gloria* and Stainer's *Crucifixion* to name but three), a large amount of new material for the choir has been performed. Works have included Vaughan Williams' *Toward the Unknown Region*, *An Oxford Elegy* and *Lord, Thou Hast Been Our Refuge*, Haydn's *Creation*, Handel's *Messiah* in its complete version (the Silver Jubilee Concert), Elgar's *Dream of Gerontius* (in 2000, for the Elgar centenary), Handel's *Coronation Anthems* (for the Queen's Golden Jubilee in 2002), Rossini's *Petite Messe Solennelle*, Charpentier's *Te Deum*, Durufle's *Requiem*, Gabrieli's *In Ecclesia*, Schubert's *Mass in G*, Bach cantatas, as well as works and anthems by Mathias, Finzi, Parry, Bruckner, Stanford, Purcell, Poulenc, and many others. It has included part songs, Gilbert & Sullivan items and light modern pieces in informal Patron's Evenings, and has sung carols at Christmas in the town, both for charity and as fund-raising for the Society. The Trafalgar Anniversary in 2005 was recognised with a highly successful evening to a full and enthusiastic audience in a concert which included Stanford's *Songs of the Sea* and *Songs of the Fleet*, this being the only major musical event for the Anniversary in the Chepstow area. In 2006, the choir's tribute to the 250th Mozart Anniversary was a further performance of the *Requiem* and the *Vesperae solennes de confessore*, - again, this was to a capacity audience, and again it was the only prominent recognition of the Anniversary in the area.

In July 2007, the Society presented two major concerts, both with professional soloists and orchestra. In March, the Spring concert comprised Haydn's *Missa Brevis in F*, Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater*, and Vivaldi's *Gloria.*, and in July the Society gave a full performance of Felix Mendelssohn's great oratorio *Elijah*, a major challenge for any choral society, and was delighted at the enthusiastic response from highly appreciative audiences. In 2008, the Society charted new ground once more, with a first performance of Dvorak's *Te Deum* and Ralph Vaughan Williams' *Benedicite* in its March 8 spring concert, which also included Faure's *Requiem*, and in July 2008 performed Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana* (two pianos and percussion version) with Brahms' *Liebeslieder.*

The 2008/2009 season saw the Society commemorate the 250th anniversary of Handel's death with a performance of the *Dettingen Te Deum* and the *Coronation Anthems*. In Spring 2010 the choir performed JS Bach's *Magnificat*, Charpentier's *Te Deum* and Mozart's *Missa Brevis in B flat.*, and once again actively participated in Chepstow Festival with a secular and popular programme, including Stanford's *Songs of the Fleet* and Coleridge-Taylor's *Hiawatha's Wedding*. Perhaps one of the choir's most successful concerts took place in the spring of 2011, with another "first", Dvorak's *Stabat Mater*.

The Society takes great pride and heart from the fact that , despite difficult times for so many smaller choral societies, we have been able to produce quality concerts with fully balanced orchestra, and the aim is always to have one concert per season which uses orchestra. The choir presents the town's annual Christmas presentation in St Mary's Church, with a mixture of choral items, family carols and seasonal readings, often including the children's choir from one of the local schools, and similarly programmes a concert for the pre-Easter season, usually on Passiontide weekend. However, changing times mean that all choral societies need to "adapt" , and the society consequently offers a lighter programme now for its Summer one , involving a mix of popular, contemporary songs along with well-known popular classics etc.

The Society has responded to different challenges during the past 35 years, and would not have survived if it had not done so. The aim of the Society is to keep choral music alive, to produce the best of which it is capable, to enjoy singing, and to present programmes that are challenging to achieve but enjoyable for audience and choir alike. A policy of support for young professional musicians has proved a positive and much applauded move, and has seen some very fine singers, commencing their national and international careers, as soloists. Many orchestra members are young qualified musicians and instrumentalists drawn from several of the nation's major Music Colleges, including many from Cardiff. The Society is affiliated to Ty Cerdd, and established its website (www.chepstowchoralsociety.org.uk) in 2004, which posts news, programme planning, concert reviews, activities and contact names and addresses, as well as a comprehensive list of past programmes and soloists since 1990.

The Society's current Musical Director is Graham Bull, who is Director of Music and Head of Performing Arts at a leading school in Gloucestershire. The Society's accompanist is Marjorie Duerden.. The Society believes that this confirms that there is both a desire and support for a mixed, thriving choral society in a small town,

despite the many difficulties facing choral singing, which have been recently well documented nationally.

Recent programmes include

2012 (June) - A Celebration of Great British Music –from Elizabeth I – Elizabeth II

2012 (December) – Christmas Festive Celebration with Dell School Singing Club and Beachley Military Wives

2013 (Spring) - Mozart “Vesperae” and Bruckner’s Requiem

2013 (Summer) – Selection of Beautiful Music for a Summer’s Evening

2014 (Spring) – Handel’s “Messiah”

2014 (Summer) – Summer Music Celebration, including popular choral classics, Rogers & Hammerstein medley, Music Hall Medley for 1914, folk songs etc

2014 (November) – A Remembrance Concert –choral items and readings, including Chepstow Comprehensive School, Beachley Rifles Batallion.

2015 (Spring) – Vivaldi “Gloria”, Schubert “Mass in G”, Haydn “Nelson” Mass

2015 (Summer –to be performed Saturday June 27th) – “With a Voice of Singing” –choral anthems with organ accompaniment, organ solos, popular part songs, lighter items –St Mary’s Priory Church, 7.30pm.