

A FOUNDER GIRL CHORISTER LOOKS BACK

The first I heard about plans to start a girls' choir at Salisbury Cathedral was an item on Newsround. As my mother's godson had been Bishop's Chorister at Salisbury some years before, and I enjoyed singing in a local choir, the news immediately appealed to me, and I told my mother straightaway that I wished to join. Oddly, it never crossed my mind for one moment that I would not be successful at the auditions, nor that heading off to boarding school at the tender age of nine would not be great fun. I have no idea how much discussion and research my parents did thereafter but, on 16 February 1991, we drove to Salisbury for the auditions, which I still remember pretty well. The next day I was watching TV when Richard Seal rang with the good news that I had indeed won a place, and the adventure began in earnest on 8 September when my parents drove me to the Cathedral School for the new term.

It would not be an adventure for me or my fellow girl choristers only. Having girl boarders was a new departure for the school, never mind running two sets of choristers, and in Christopher Helyer there was a new headmaster as well. For those children already there, and their parents, there must have been some trepidation as to what this new era would bring. As one of an eight-strong contingent in my year (the 4s, as the age-group was called in those days), I had four years at the school, and I hope I can be forgiven for donning rose-tinted spectacles when reviewing them. I have a mine-full of memories, many of them cherished, some, I dare say, slight in significance to anyone else, of course some less happy, and certainly far too many to write here, so this is a very partial account.

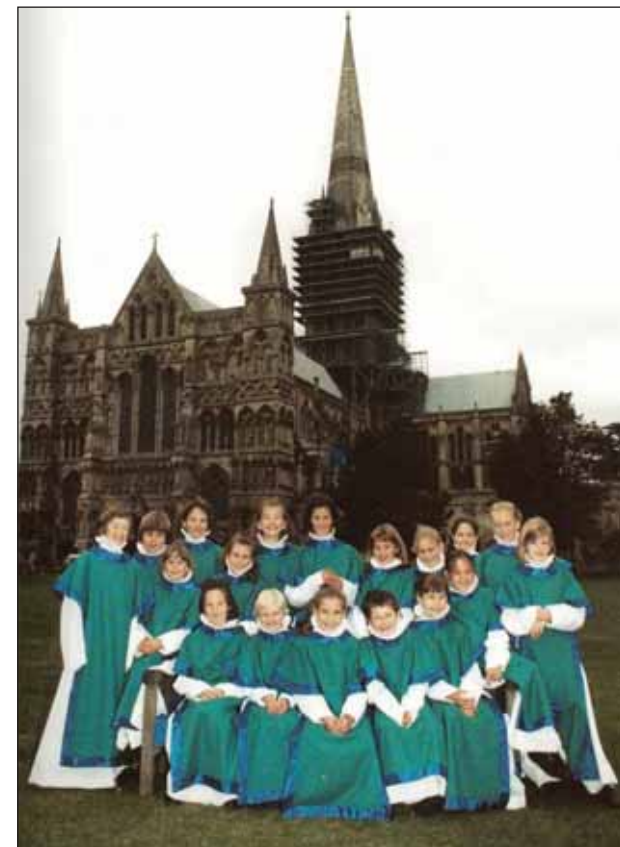
But mention Psalm 84, or play the jaunty opening of Stanford's Magnificat in B-flat to any one of that first crowd, and she will be transported back to the stalls on 7 October 1991, the occasion of the choir's first evensong. A recording of the service is perhaps of more historical worth than musical – I recall that we (though not the lay clerks, I'm sure!) were inclined to sing flat. Thereafter, we were gradually introduced to the liturgical life and tradition of worship of the cathedral. The first eucharist took place one midweek evening in the Trinity Chapel; in 1992, we took part in the 'Darkness to Light' Advent procession; and we began to stay in school after the end of term for more and more of the 'cherry hols', so that by my final year the eight oldest of us sang with the boys and men on Christmas Day 1994, and the full complement did so on Easter Day 1995.

In time, we also took part in some momentous concerts and events in and beyond Salisbury. Personal highlights include the concert marking the end of the Spire Appeal, attended by the Prince of Wales; the enthronement of the new bishop; the Proms at the Royal Albert Hall – Mahler's Third Symphony with the National Youth Orchestra; Britten's Spring Symphony at the Royal Festival Hall with John

Eliot Gardiner and the Monteverdi Choir, which we subsequently recorded for Deutsche Grammophon; and a dinner in aid of the girl choristers' fund at 10 Downing Street – preceded by lunch in Lord Archer's penthouse flat overlooking the Thames (his wife was host, but he made an appearance, and told us to remove our shoes as they were making black marks on his floor).

Life at the school was integral to the experience. All the boy choristers boarded, but of the first intake of girls, just eight of the eighteen did so at first, divided between Bishops and Beauchamp dormitories in the old Bishop's Palace. The imaginations of prep-school children living in such an old building were fertile ground for stories of ghosts and mysterious goings-on, and where could be better for history lessons than the medieval Queen's Gate? In my view, the whole school felt as if it was part of another era – and I mean that as a good thing.

Our weekday routine depended on whether we were singing evensong or not. If so, we were woken at 7 o'clock, expected to dress quickly, and then polish our shoes for inspection by a sleepy gap-year student, before doing at least twenty minutes' music practice. Breakfast followed, and then choir practice over in the cathedral Song Room. Lessons finished at 4.15, and the old ship's bell summoned us to line up in our blue cloaks (once they had been donated by a generous supporter) and process over, two by two, for more practice and evensong. If not singing evensong, get-up was at 7.15, instrumental practice after breakfast, and choir practice over in the Song Room at lunchtime. Sometimes we also rehearsed with the lay clerks in the stalls late on a Friday evening, and I remember walking over on cold, dark winter's nights to enter the cathedral via the Dean's door, when



1991 Salisbury Cathedral Girl Choristers

the fog – tinted an eerie orange by the street lights – was so thick it concealed the spire and you couldn't see more than a couple of metres ahead.

I could go on! But I must finish by emphasizing how important those few years continue to be today for me and, if I may speak for them, my contemporaries. Many of us are still close friends and see each other often, and I know that my life would not have taken the same course without such a musical education. I continue to sing as a serious hobby, and of course many do now make a living from music. Some might have done so anyway, but life as a chorister – the education, discipline and sheer enjoyment – gave them a tremendous foundation. And I'm pleased to say that, despite our youth, we were even then conscious of what a bold step it was, how privileged we were, and how frankly idyllic the life that we led there – and I think I can speak for all of us when I say that we are eternally grateful to Dr Seal and all those at the cathedral and school who made it happen.

Hilary Weale
Chorister 1991-95

(Front row of photo, seated second left)