

Some Key Events in CSA's History



A combination of concerns about educational standards, pastoral care and most particularly, impending government legislation was responsible for three choir school headmasters meeting in 1918 at the behest of the innovative head of Westminster Abbey Choir School, the Rev'd W. E. Morgan.

Morgan, together with Mr C. R. Jelf of King's College School, Cambridge and the Rev'd R. H. Couchman of St Paul's Cathedral School, all leading and respected headmasters of their time, met to discuss these issues, and so began the Association which has become known as the Choir Schools' Association and which is now approaching its hundredth year.

Potential government legislation forbidding the employment of children of chorister age was the reason these headmasters were concerned, and their meeting was, in part, to discuss strategies for addressing this. The Bill, was of course, aimed at the exploitation of child actors and entertainers, not cathedral choristers and the legislation that followed happily embraced this distinction.

The Early Years

Following this initial meeting, the newly formed Association decided to meet annually and to include in its membership all heads of Anglican cathedrals and other choral foundations in the country. Reginald Couchman became the driving force behind the new Association and was appointed secretary, a position he held until 1937.

Photos of Couchman suggest he was a man of a kindly disposition and this proved to be the case when in 1924 he admitted as a probationer a certain C. Groves who was eight years old at the time. Very sadly, the boy's father had died and his mother was to die a year after he entered the choir. In later life, celebrated conductor and musician Sir Charles Groves was to look back at his time at St Paul's with great affection and appreciation for the family life and security that Reginald Couchman and his wife had provided whilst he was a chorister in their care.

Sir Charles is one of many examples of young people who have benefited from the unique and extraordinary education that choristers receive. Examples abound from all walks of life. This has been the case over many years and further examples are recorded later.

Most unfortunately, the early records of the Association's deliberations were lost during the war in 1942, so little is known of important happenings that occurred up to this time.

1970s Politics

Once again, in the 1970s, it was political events that were to engender positive reactions from members of the Association.

This was a time in Britain when left wing politicians, intellectuals and others with influence were mounting a serious campaign against what they termed 'private schools', with Labour's Roy Hattersley warning heads at the IAPS conference in 1973, that a future Labour government would implement a 'death sentence' on their establishments. Labour did form a government in 1974 and Alan Quilter, CSA chairman that year, urged colleagues to become more proactive in seeking ways of safeguarding their most precious, but now vulnerable, choral heritage.

Happily, the dire predictions made by certain members of the Labour party never materialised, but these threats were certainly a wake-up call for members of the CSA and the rest of the independent sector.

Other important initiatives included a meeting between Neil Kinnock, a future Labour leader, with George Guest, organist of St John's Cambridge and Alan Mould, the eminent headmaster of the choir school. The tone of their meeting developed into a most positive one when Kinnock, a Welshman with a passion for singing, came to realise that the country would be deprived of a valuable traditional part of its singing heritage if the existence of choir schools was to be threatened. He clearly did not want this to happen on his watch.

Gradually by the '90s, the Labour government was persuaded that suppressing independent education was neither a sensible nor a practical option and began to realise that choir schools had something special to offer their communities and the nation.

The Association Grows Stronger

Several other important initiatives were happening during the '80s with Michael Barcroft, chairman in 1980 and founder of the Choir Schools' Review, playing a prominent part which included welcoming Roman Catholic foundations into membership of the Association. Christopher Martin, chairman in 1987, was responsible for initiating a more purposeful and formal two and a half day conference in place of the usual one day occasion. Gerald Peacocke of King's Cambridge was the first chairman to officially hold office for two years, which has enabled greater continuity in the affairs of the Association.

During the late 1980s and '90s the financial position of the Association became stronger and part time salaried officers were employed to attend to the important areas of publicity (information) and of administration. The administrator's role became crucial in 1991 when the Conservative government of the time, through the good offices of education minister Angela Rumbold, provided ongoing funding through the Music and Ballet (now Dance) Scheme to support needy chorister parents with payment of fees.

Working with Primary Schools

In 1999, Richard White, the headmaster of the choir school in Truro became chairman of the Association and initiated an outreach scheme that involved choristers going into local primary schools to reawaken and encourage interest in singing, particularly by boys. This was principally due to a realisation that many of the nation's primary schools had, over the years, become increasingly deprived of proper singing opportunities.

Following a well-attended conference at St Paul's by several interested and sympathetic bodies, the scheme, with some modest funding and strong support from the government's Music and Dance Scheme, expanded, and soon involved ten other foundations. A little later,

and rather surprisingly, Labour's secretary of state for education, Alan Johnson, became keen for the government to become involved. He requested that the operation be expanded further with considerably more funding being made available.

By 2008, this had become a well-established and thriving outreach campaign and had enrolled some thirty foundations. Later that year, the project became managed by a government appointed body called Sing Up, but continued to operate along very similar lines. When, two and a half years later in 2011, the project came to an end and funding ceased, around forty foundations had become involved and thousands of primary school children in many parts of the country had benefited from their chorister inspired singing experiences.

In addition, an impressive number of newly formed junior choirs had also been established in most areas of the country. During the twelve years that this initiative had been in operation, the national reputation and standing of the Choir Schools' Association had been enhanced considerably through this successful enterprise.

Former Choristers

Mention was made earlier of cathedral choristers who have gone on to achieve great things. The list is long, particularly, as one might expect, in the world of music. In the most senior ranks here must be included Sir David Willcocks and Sir Mark Elder with much younger success stories such as Bob Chilcot and Roy Goodman. In the world of sport we have Alistair Cook, captain of England's cricket team and Laurence Dallaglio, ex captain of English rugby. In politics there is David Lammy and in journalism, Jon Snow and Aled Jones. In the world of acting, there is Simon Russell Beale.

In Conclusion

CSA is most grateful to Alan Mould, former Headmaster of St John's College School, Cambridge and CSA Chairman in 1977. His scholarly and detailed history of the English Chorister has been a valuable source of reference for the writer of this brief history of the Association.

Richard White, March 2014