

## Harry's Sermon as Boy Bishop - 2014

I recently visited Belgium with the Senior Chamber Choir to take part in the 1000 Voices for Peace concert. We were one of thirty nine choirs from countries involved in the First World War who took part in this homage to peace. Whilst in Belgium, we also took part in a service at St George's Memorial Chapel, Ypres to commemorate the seventy Old Herefordians who died in the Great War. When I returned home, I was interested to discover that one of the seventy, Charles Howard Harris, was, like me, a chorister at Hereford Cathedral.

Charles Harris was born in 1897. He was the son of Edward Charles and Flora Caroline Harris and lived at 56, Broad Street. So, unlike me, he would have been able to go home after Matins on Sundays. Although I do not know the exact dates when Charles Harris was a chorister, I think this would have been sometime between 1904 and 1911 when he was aged between seven and fourteen years old.

Being a chorister in the 1900s was even more of a commitment than it is today. During my time as a chorister, I took part in hundreds of services, which I find quite amazing. However, the choristers at the beginning of the twentieth century would have taken part in even more services as the only time they had off was a half holiday on Wednesdays and three weeks summer holiday. Boys who lived at great distances from Hereford were boarded out in private houses, which, living in Kington, would have helped me after many a late concert.

I joined Hereford Cathedral as a probationer in September 2009, about one hundred years after Charles Harris. For me, this meant moving from Shobdon Primary School to Hereford Cathedral Junior School. Each morning, my fellow probationers and I were whisked off by Mr Dyke for training leading up to the chorister test. This is a big moment for a probationer as the test determines whether or not you become a full chorister. I remember that my test took place at Mr Bowen's house. Mrs Bowen kindly offered me lunch but I declined in case it was the other half of the avocado that Mr Bowen was enjoying! Fortunately, the journey from Kington gave me plenty of time to revise and I passed the test first time. I was 'ruffed' on the 15<sup>th</sup> July 2010 along with my fellow probationers, Michael and William. This also happened to be the valediction service for three of my former mentors: Anthony, Rory and Matthew.

When Charles Harris joined the choir in the early 1900s, the organist was Dr George Robinson Sinclair. Sinclair's dog, Dan, as many of my former colleagues behind me may know, is the subject of one of Elgar's *Enigma Variations*. Dan attended choir practices with his master and apparently growled at choristers who sang out of tune. Mr Bowen may like to consider taking this approach.

Sinclair was a dignified role model. The choristers held him in great esteem and affection and were happy and worked as a well-disciplined team. This was also my experience as a chorister under Mr Bowen's direction. Dr Sinclair arranged for a room to be built in his garden which was known as 'The Ark' and this was where practices were held until a song room was built. The modern day equivalent of 'The Ark' is Choir House where choristers and probationers keep Mr Gacek on his toes in between practices and services.

Like me, Charles Harris would have enjoyed chorister outings as these were started in the 1880s. The annual chorister outing continues to be a popular event today. It is quite possible that the outings I enjoyed and those enjoyed by Charles Harris and his fellow choristers had at least one thing in common – a steam train journey.

However, I do not think that Charles Harris would have been on tour abroad as a chorister. A year after I joined, the choir went on tour to South Africa for the first time. I had just started Year 5 and so was nine years old when we went but fortunately I didn't have home sickness. It was a fantastic experience, the only disappointment being that we did not see an elephant in its natural environment.

During my time in the choir, I also had the honour of taking part in a Christmas CD recording and several radio broadcasts. Participating in the Three Choirs Festival was one of the highlights of my time as a chorister and something which I share in common with Charles Harris. He and I will have sung much of the same choral music and perhaps even stood in the same place in the choir stalls behind me.

Charles Harris served in the 26<sup>th</sup> battalion of the Royal Fusiliers. The battalion set off for France on the 4<sup>th</sup> of May 1916 and took part in various battles on the western front including the Battle of Flers-Courcelette and the Battle of the Transloy Ridges. Charles was only 19 years old when he died on the 10 October 1916 as a result of wounds received in action two days earlier.

If Charles Harris, and millions others like him, had not made the ultimate sacrifice, then I may never have had the opportunity to be a chorister at Hereford Cathedral. In 1916, the year when Charles died, John Maxwell Edmunds wrote "When you go Home, tell them of us and say, For your Tomorrow, we gave our Today". Charles gave his today for my tomorrow and for this I will always be grateful.