

Tractarian Choir Schools: The London Choir School And The Savoy Chapel

The chapel was built as part of Savoy Palace between 1345-70 and dedicated to St John the Baptist; the chapel choristers, known as "the little clerks" were paid £2 each per year. The chapel and palace were destroyed in the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. Henry VII rebuilt it as the Savoy Hospital for the poor, complete with chapel in 1512; at the re-opening the choristers' scarlet and gold costumes with Tudor ruffs were introduced.

The Savoy hospital was demolished in the 19th century except for the chapel which continued in use. After a disastrous fire in 1864, when much of the chapel was destroyed, Queen Victoria took a personal interest in the restoration and approved the building of a Choir School, adjacent to the chapel, which was opened in 1883 exclusively for the choristers. However, relations between the Savoy chapel and the school deteriorated to such an extent that in 1919 the headmaster withdrew all the choristers from the chapel choir. This prompted the chapel authorities to eventually sell the choir school to the Savoy hotel who wanted the land to extend the hotel.

The story now continues with Carlton Borrow, a young army officer just home from WWI and a highly accomplished musician who became the sub-organist at the Savoy chapel. Coming from a wealthy family and having decided that teaching was his vocation, he bought the Champion Hill Prep School for Boys, South London in 1916, taking the role as Headmaster and immediately forming a choir at the school, which soon gained a reputation for excellence.

Fortunately the Savoy chapel wasn't without choristers for long, as Carlton Borrow offered to supply boys from his Prep school; a year later the Prep School was moved to larger premises in Dog Kennel Hill and renamed the London Choir School. The school, which was day and boarding, supplied over a 100 London churches with choristers, either on a permanent or ad-hoc basis. Borrow selected only the very finest boys for the Savoy choir and once appointed, that is where they stayed. To be a Savoy chorister was the ultimate accolade.

There were three rehearsals per week at the London Choir School for the Savoy boys, taken by Carlton Borrow and if there was to be a special service in the Chapel, Dr Derry, the organist and choirmaster, would go the school to take extra practices. On Friday there was a choir practice at the Chapel with the boys arriving at six-thirty, followed by the men an hour later. The men and boys sung Sunday Matins, with the boys having a practice from ten to ten-thirty followed by the service at eleven. Evensong was sung by the boys singing in three parts.

On Sundays the boys wore Eton suits and mortarboards with a blue tassel. At school, they wore royal blue blazers with the school crest, grey shorts and matching socks. When they got too old for shorts they wore black jackets with pin stripe trousers.

In 1928 the choristers of Westminster Abbey undertook the first ever foreign tour by an English choir, visiting the USA and Canada. Two years later in 1930 'The Children of His Majesty's Chapel Savoy' were personally granted permission by King George V to become the second English choir to go on tour. The entire trip was organized and funded by the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, the only caveat being that the choristers would not wear robes for singing secular songs. The choristers took with them their cassocks and surplices, their scarlet and gold tunics with Tudor ruffs and to complete the ensemble, each boy was measured for a handmade suit and overcoat.



Departing Euston for Montreal; Carlton Borrow (sub-organist and Choirmaster) in train door

The press coverage of the event was extensive; they were very much the equivalent of today's pop stars and very soon it was decided that the initial three month tour school be extended to six. During the sea voyage, the boys continued with their lessons and gave several concerts, much to the delight of fellow passengers.

The choristers made their debut in St Andrew's Church, Sherbrooke on October 17th, then embarking on a three week concert tour of the Maritime Provinces, before returning to Montreal on November 7th, where they gave a concert at 'His Majesty's Theatre' on the 9th. The Montreal Gazette waxed lyrical over the forthcoming concert: "The twelve choirboys who will be heard here are said to be the pick of a country renowned throughout the world for its wonderful boy sopranos. They will be heard in church music, dressed in scarlet and gold costumes, surmounted by a quaint Tudor ruff, garbed exactly as they appear on the festival occasions in London."

The Orpheum Theatre at Prince Albert was packed to capacity and the local paper reported "The boys came out on stage in scarlet cassocks and white surplices followed by their director,



© Montreal Gazette

Carlton Borrow, who seated himself behind a screen of palms at the piano. They sang with hands behind their back with no self-consciousness. The twelve youngsters painted a vocal masterpiece that will not perish easily. They brought the traditional music of the English Church and interpreted it so delightfully, with such perfect articulation and so much spirituality that it lost reality. To have heard the singing of the children of the Chapel of the Savoy

is to have partaken of a benediction. Iwan Davies will be remembered for in addition to his beautiful voice he possesses that illusive characteristic called "platform presence" and a faculty for losing himself in the spirit of the song. He made it hard to believe a boy stood there and sang as never a soprano has sung. The purity of this boy's voice is amazing."

All the boys had solos from time to time but the major work in this field was always undertaken by their star attraction, Iwan Davies. However, it was little Master Haddock who often won the hearts of the audience. The reporter went on to say "On one occasion *A Night Nursery* by Arundale was sung by the choir's 'baby' and it seems a shame that the name of the lad was not allowed publicity but it is the rule of the choir. Even an encore was denied him although the audience insisted and the 'baby' of the choir bowed to discipline even though he won the hearts of the audience. At the close of each concert, *God Save the King* was sung always as we have never heard it, softly, reverently, loyally."

Throughout the tour the press reports continued to be ecstatic, the only reservations being about the suitability of some of the more sentimental pieces rendered in the second half of the programmes: "Perfect as it is, it did seem to some that "Daddy" as an encore in spite of being beautifully rendered was totally out of place here, it being of a rather overdrawn sentimental nature. But it was included to meet many requests."

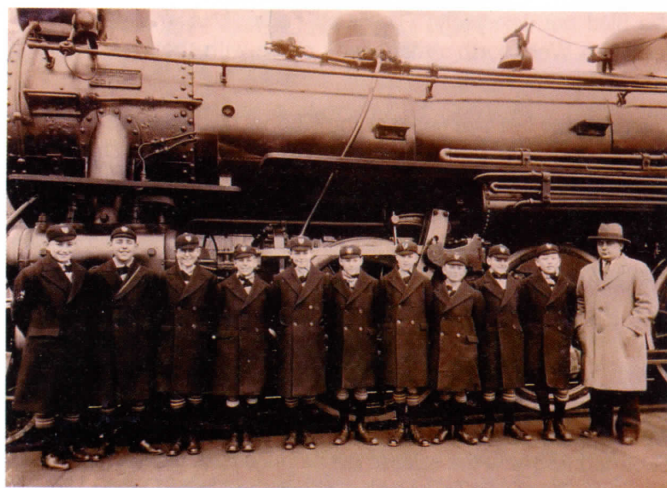
The boys travelled extensively by train and crossed the continent several times during their tour. One might ask what became of their school lessons but it seems that 'reading, 'riting and 'rithmetic' were conducted during the long train journeys, much to the amusement of the press who liked to quiz the boys about their morning lessons! Towards the end of the tour the boys were thrilled to travel in an airplane piloted by two wartime Aces. Asked if they were frightened, one lad replied: "Oh, no, sir. The world looked like a map." "Surrounded by mountains," added another.

The occasion for the flight was to give a series of concerts in Edmonton and they boarded two Canada Airways Fokker monoplanes at Saskatoon. "When and where is lunch?" seems to have been the stock worry of the boys as they arrived and were keen to point out to waiting reporters that the customary in-transit lesson had been cancelled that morning. There was much humour at the boys rather over-dressed state! "dressed for the kind of weather which England expects Canada to have. Each boy had heavy overshoes and heavy blue overcoats. They stepped briskly out of their machines, looked around and were greeted by around 250 persons congregated on the airfield for a glimpse of them.

They made a picturesque group as they stood in the shadow of the aeroplane's wing in the bright afternoon sunshine, each of the 12 with his red cassock rolled neatly under his arm and the long red tassel swinging gaily from his mortar-board. The typical Alberta sunshine seemed to render the heavy snow shoes unnecessary, but no chances were being taken in keeping the boys in perfect health, it was explained.

Asked if they were keen to go home, the boys replied a definite "No!" As they left the field to fulfil their matinee performance for the Edmonton children, no-one would credit the pranks they were reported to have been up to in Toronto and Kitchener, the round chubby one especially, as having a grain of truth!"

Sadly the extended tour, which had lasted six months, came to an end with a rather disappointing farewell concert in Montreal, a city in which they had given several concerts throughout the



© Montreal Press. Central station, Montreal, with Ernest Desaulles, agent for Canadian Board of Trade

winter. In fact, the press severely criticised the concert-going public for missing one of the finest performances of the whole tour in His Majesty's Theatre. And so towards the end of April 1931 it was time for the boys to return to England. They boarded the Red Star Line, S.S. Pentland, where it seemed they dined in fine style on dishes as varied as oysters on half shells, Spanish olives, smoked beef, poached shad back, loin of veal, and salami of celery fed duckling. Truly dishes fit for the choristers of a King!

Some insight into life in the choir during the 1930's is given by John Thompson, chorister from 1932-1938: "As a small boy I found the practices at the Chapel quite terrifying. Fortunately, I could read music fairly well but Dr Derry was very formidable and would have the 'rabbits' as he called the younger inexperienced boys, singing on their own, while the older boys got restless waiting for whomever was the unfortunate individual to get the passage right. Sometimes Dr Derry would say 'You know whose fault it is, why you are being kept in late'. This meant that the poor boy in question would be punished by the bigger boys after the practice by being punched, trousers removed and on rare occasions, ducked in the Thames by Cleopatra's Needle.

We would travel from the school to the Chapel by tram and us boys would rush to the upstairs front to get the tram rocking from side to side! This ended with the conductor rushing upstairs to stop us or sometimes giving us a clip around the ear! Weddings at the Savoy Chapel were usually posh ones. The boys received tips from one shilling to five shillings; in those days this was wealth indeed. Sometimes we did three weddings in a day. Dr Derry had a nasty habit of fining the choir if a mistake was made during the service. We never knew what happened to these fines. We suspected that they paid for his drinks.

After I had been in the choir for a couple of years I found that most of the older boys used to visit Woolworths in the Strand to indulge in minor shoplifting, mainly sweets. After one Friday practice we were in the vestry putting on our coats ready to go home when Dr Derry said to his son Daniel, who was also in the choir, 'Lock the door, Dan'. This sounded most foreboding and everyone looked anxious. Dr Derry made the boys line up and one by one we were ordered to empty our pockets. By the time this operation was completed there was a large pile of sweets of all descriptions plus miscellaneous articles such as penknives on the table.

Dr Derry told us the manager of Woolworths had complained about our nefarious activities and that we shall all feel very ashamed that we had brought the name of the Royal Chapel into disrepute. He told us to report early for the next Friday practice.

Tractarian Choir Schools

We filed out dejectedly. The next Friday Dr Derry marched us round to Woolworth's manager's office with the loot and each boy had to apologise.

During my last two years at the Chapel I would leave the choir practice with Barnett who lived at Forest Hill and Dr Derry. We walked along the Strand and when we said goodbye at the underground station he used to hand over six old pence between us with which we brought two delicious ham rolls. Sometimes, however, much to our chagrin, he just said goodbye."

The 1930's & 40's was the period which saw some or all of Savoy choristers involved in film work. *Goodbye Mr Chips* in 1931, starring Robert Donat featured a mixture of Savoy boys and others from the London Choir School performing the soundtrack and appearing in the film itself as the 'school chapel choir'. 1938 saw the release of the hugely successful film, *Sixty Glorious Years*, in Technicolor, about the life of Queen Victoria and starring Anna Neagle as Victoria. It featured briefly some of the Savoy Choristers joined by those from the Chapel Royal. The film had the blessing of the Royal Family and many royal locations, including Buckingham Palace, were for the first time ever, allowed to be used for the filming.

The London Choir School, and with it the Savoy Choristers, were evacuated on the 2nd September 1939, the day before war was declared, to Stonepitts Manor, an Elizabethan house near Seal. Dr Derry and his wife also reluctantly decide to close up their very fine Georgian house on the north side of Clapham Common for 'the duration' and take up Carlton Borrow's offer of accommodation at the new school in exchange for assistance with teaching. Mrs. Derry, who was ultra left wing, proved to be an excellent teacher of English. They did, however, both return to live in London during the war years.

After a few weeks the period known as the 'phoney war' set in, when seemingly nothing was happening as the first bombs didn't fall on London until August 24th 1940. Many of the London churches who had been supplied with choristers from the London Choir School asked for services to resume, as well as weekday weddings and funerals; so choral services resumed again at the Savoy Chapel. Weddings at the Savoy chapel were very frequent events and there could be up to three or four on a Saturday, particularly as it was one of the very few London churches which would marry divorced couples.

Bryan Cooper, a chorister from 1942-1948 recalls "It was the custom at weddings in those days for the best man to give Derry a tip for the choirboys. Most of the weddings in those days were in uniform and the tradition was that if the bridegroom wore spurs, the tip would be higher, usually half-a-crown each. We seldom ever saw it. Derry usually would find some reason to 'fine' us - because someone came in too early or sang a note out of tune. We would see him trot across the road to the Savoy Tavern after the service and grumble that 'he's spending our money again'".

But choristers are usually not to be outdone, as Bryan Cooper relates when they used to restore the balance of what they considered unfair fines! "I was only 12 when I was put in charge of the Savoy Choir and made responsible for the journey to and from London and was let into the secret by my predecessor whose voice had broken. You bought one or two fewer tickets than you had boys and pocketed the difference! Ticket collectors on a crowded platform had no time to count the number of boys going through the barrier. Another ruse was to use some out of date tickets with the new ones so the number of tickets and boys matched. If the platform was less crowded, I would tell the boys to run though the barrier before me so they couldn't be counted".

As soon as war was declared, the gentlemen left the choir to join up and Dr Derry set about arranging much of the music, such as the responses, psalms and anthems, including Wesley's *Lead me Lord* into four parts for the boys to sing. Yet despite the bombings, the difficulties of travelling from Stonepitts and the not insignificant danger, the Savoy choristers, ten in number at that time, never missed a service except when home for the summer break. It was not unusual for the choristers to have to dodge down shelters during an air raid or be late due to the bombing of railway lines. One chorister recalls "One Sunday a doodle bug landed on the YWCA - it was an enormous bang and we were blasted to the ground; we picked ourselves up and went to church as normal."

Charles Brown, a chorister at the London Choir School was 'promoted' to the Savoy, after his church, St Bride's, was bombed and recalls "there were ten of us and I generally sang the third part, being of the eldest with a voice that was getting lower. I reckon that his (Dr Derry's) arrangements were very good and certainly very pleasant to sing. One elderly gentleman who was always in the congregation always insisted on singing the responses whereas the rest of the congregation kept silent. Anyway the good Doctor had a word with him after one service and asked him not to join in the responses. Congregations just about half filled the Chapel and I believe quite a few lived at the Savoy hotel.

Late in 1941 the famous photographer, Bill Brant, with his team from 'Picture Post' visited the Savoy Chapel to prepare for the Christmas issue and a photograph of David King which was entitled 'Innocence of Youth' was selected to appear on the front cover. David recalls "we took it in our stride and thought nothing more about it, However, some weeks later, my picture appeared on the cover of the magazine, appearing on the news stands on December 22nd, my mother's birthday. My father, on his way home from night work saw the magazine and immediately bought 6 copies, took them home and tossed them onto my mother's bed with the greeting, 'Happy Birthday!'"



© Bill Brant

The Queen's Coronation - 60 years on

Before the War most London churches maintained the historic tradition of 'Beating the Bounds' where their choristers would lead the procession; the ceremony at the Savoy Chapel dates back to the time of Henry II.

The object of the annual ceremony around the Duchy of Lancaster's land was to locate little iron tablets which marked the boundaries and to make sure no devious neighbour had removed any, and if he had done so, then by ancient ritual he was cursed with bell, book and candle.

The highlight of the ceremony, as far as the boys were concerned, happened at Middle Temple where the iron tablet was down a drain. The manhole cover was removed and a chorister upended, held by his legs and dangled down so he could attest to the tablet's presence!

The cartoonist David Low accompanied such a procession in May 1925 and asked the beadle what would happen if the boy was accidentally dropped down the drain. The reply was "Oh, that's alright. We always bring a dozen with us, just in case!" The 1955 photograph (below) shows the unfortunate chorister was no longer required to be dangled down the drain; instead he was ceremoniously upended and 'bumped' on the spot of the tablet beneath - gently one hopes! This tradition died out in the 1960's but I am delighted to report that it was revived again in 2012.



© Daily Mirror; chorister Allan Craig is upended.

When Carlton Borrow retired, the London Choir School was taken over by Fr William Ingram and by 1952 rumours of excessive corporal punishment began to surface, resulting in the eventual imprisonment of Ingram, who was not even an ordained priest. The Savoy Chapel acted swiftly and decisively and was the first establishment to sever all connections with the London Choir School.

This severing of the connection is where we take our leave of the Savoy Chapel, as it brings to a close the period of the Tractarian inspired Choir School; but that is certainly not the end of the Savoy Chapel choir, for it continues to thrive with 20 choristers plus lay-clerks, singing each Sunday morning in Term time and with St Olave's Grammar School in Orpington exclusively educating the Savoy choristers since 1953 - a contemporary take on the Tractarian Choir School.

This article by **Colin Brownlee** is part of a book in preparation: full details will be in the next magazine. In the meantime, see his website www.inquires.org.uk

THE QUEEN'S CORONATION - 60 YEARS ON

Eddie Officer, who as a chorister at St Anne's Cathedral Belfast, sang at the 1953 Coronation, recounts the 60th Anniversary Service:

For a boy aged 14, 1953 was just another year - school, sport, studies (occasional), and singing, the latter at the Cathedral every Tuesday, Wednesday, Saturday and twice on Sunday, and lessons with Sidney Gaukrodger at various times. Early that year, after one evensong I was approached in the chancel by our highly respected organist and choirmaster, Capt. Charles Brennan. There was no introduction, just, "You're going to the Coronation in June". More than a little surprised I could only manage, "Thank you, Captain", as he walked off.

My six years in the choir had given me experience of a number of important services, and each had its own impact, but the word 'Coronation' sounded significantly greater. As the weeks and months towards June went by, the impetus grew. My mother and Headmaster in B.R.A. were contacted, and they began to get an increasing number of letters from Westminster Abbey and the Royal School of Church Music. All the arrangements were made through our parents. I assume that my fellow chorister and close friend Dermot McConnell had received the same initial direction from "Charlie", and shared the same growing excitement with me, not least the promise of a few weeks away from school.

Four weeks before the 3rd June, Dermot and I travelled by boat and train, accompanied by his mother, to Addington Palace, in Croydon. The 18th century building has had a number of owners, which passed from one to the next because of the personal financial problems of each. In 1807 an Act of Parliament enabled it to be purchased as a residence for a succession of six Archbishops of Canterbury. The ground had been landscaped by the famous "Capability" Brown. During the First World War it was taken over by the Red Cross and used as a fever hospital. It became a Grade 2 listed building in 1951, and in 1953 it was leased by the RSCM to house 30 choirboys from all over Britain who were to act as the core of the treble line at the Coronation of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth. We had arrived.

We spent the following 4 weeks practising for 4 or 5 hours each day under the guidance of Mr Edred Wright, the RSCM's choirmaster, an experience in itself. We arrived at Westminster Abbey on 3rd June, as near note perfect as was possible. The experience of that day, seated in the gallery above the chancel where all the royalty sat, where we looked down to our left at the crowning ceremony, and in the choir of 500 as we sang our hearts out with wonderfully stirring music was an experience, still unsurpassed.

I returned home to continue my school studies, sport and music. My voice broke a year later, and I was unceremoniously directed to the organ loft where I played the tympani for 3 years before a couple of changes in occupation and a very full life sent me elsewhere. I was rarely asked about nor spoke of those wonderful 4 weeks. They were mine, precious memories kept.

Age has reduced the number of little grey cells, but out of the blue earlier this year I was contacted by Westminster Abbey, and by the RSCM to ask if I would be prepared to join with some of the Addington Palace Past Choristers at the Abbey for a service commemorating the anniversary of the Coronation, in the presence of the Royal Family. If anything, this caught me off guard more than the initial 'instruction' from the Captain in 1953, but with age comes the ability to make quick decisions, correctly