

Scaling the Heights



In every profession or occupation there are pinnacles, some of which seem attainable and others which we can only imagine in our wildest dreams.

I remember when I took over the choir, around 13 years ago. I had grown up in a lovely church choir in Surrey and had had the privilege, as a boy and a young man, to sing with the Royal School of Church Music Cathedral Singers and, with both of these choirs, I had been given countless opportunities to sing services in the country's great cathedrals. Church

choral music, which I feel is at the very centre of English culture, is very much in my blood and I had always hoped that one day I might direct a choir myself.

After I came back to England from a four-year stint of singing in opera houses in Germany, I was exhausted with singing. People in the opera world tend to assume that, if you have gone to Germany to work, you will come back dead, and not without good reason; my voice and my confidence were shattered. I had very little work on in the UK and I no longer had confidence in my ability to sing. I needed a new challenge – something which would restore my pride.

I was just about to walk the dog one day, when *The Messenger* dropped through the letter-box. I flicked through and saw an advert pleading for someone to come forward to 'Lead our fledgling choir'. It started me thinking and before I returned from my walk, I had already imagined the choir of Holy Trinity, Bledlow, singing at a cathedral one day.

Most of you will know what has happened since. The choir has become improbably good for a village church choir and we have now sung in the cathedrals of Christchurch, Oxford, Norwich, Peterborough, Wells, Lincoln, Birmingham, Winchester, Worcester, Southwark, Hereford, St Albans, Coventry, Salisbury, St Edmundsbury, Ripon, York Minster, Southwell Minster, the American Cathedral in Paris and Malvern Priory. The hard work, tenacity and willingness to follow my crazy ideas has been astounding and I would like to take this opportunity to thank the choir for everything that they have done, not only for the church, but for me also, because their work has started me on a new career path with my Choral Holidays company, as well as giving me the confidence to launch my career as a singing teacher and to resume singing again with much more assurance and enjoyment than before. With the help of the incomparable Cynthia Hall at the organ (who would have believed that we would get a cathedral-standard organist to play at Bledlow on a regular basis? – but we did believe and it has happened), the members have achieved things that none of us would have thought possible in our wildest dreams at that first practice, 13 years ago.

Amongst my favourite memories, we have seen three ladies who said 'never get us to sing harmonies, we can only ever sing the tune' become the regular 2nd sopranos. We have seen at least one person who has said 'never, ever' to solos, sing a solo in a cathedral.

Now the choir has been offered the chance of reaching the very pinnacle of the visiting choir world. We had already booked in to sing at Portsmouth Cathedral (31st March) and at Birmingham Cathedral (9th June) and we had a conditional offer to sing at Durham Cathedral, which is one of the most sought after gigs in the country, on 29th and 30th December. The condition was that I send a recording to prove that we were up to the required standard. I sent a recording of our recent service at Ripon Cathedral. Then I thought I would take a punt and send it off also to St Paul's Cathedral. A week or so later, a reply came back from St Paul's to say that they would be delighted to welcome the choir of Holy Trinity, Bledlow, to sing Evensong at St Paul's Cathedral on 7th January 2019.

I cannot begin to tell you what an achievement this is. For a choir from a parish as small as Bledlow to be invited to sing at St Paul's is like Wycombe Wanderers reaching the FA Cup Final. Congratulations to all the members. You are amazing people.

Please put the dates in your diaries and come along to support us.

Jeff Stewart