

Choir Notes - September 2025

We meet on 12th June. We are singing Evensong at the end of the month, but there is no urgency to practise for that, so Jeff produces canticle music from his attic to try out - part of a trove of sheet music given to him by his church in Ashted where he sang as a lad.

The first one that we try is by someone called Holman, which Jeff takes back when we have had a go at it. I think we may not see that one again.

Then he hands out canticles by Sir Henry Walford Davies KCVO OBE (1869 –1941). The music says on the cover that it is copyright 1901, and the paper is showing its age. Repaired once with sellotape, the sellotape has lost its stick, and the pages are battered and worn from repeated handling. Sir Henry is well known. He was Master of the King's Music from 1934 until 1941. He served with the RAF in the First World War, and he composed the Royal Air Force March Past. We sing his Magnificat. Jeff does not collect in the music, so we may sing it again.

Then Jeff hands out canticles by Basil Harwood (1859 –1949), which are mainstream church music. We whizz through this once, as we are nearing our normal stop time, but there remains a surprise in store. Jeff asks Joy to leave. She pretends to be alarmed that we need to discuss her “singing”, but after she has gone, Jeff produces words (that he has written to mark her re-location to South Africa), to sing to the tune of Beethoven's ‘*Ode to Joy*’. Joy is having a village farewell party at The Lions, and the choir will embarrass her with it there! What joy to sing the ‘*Ode to Joy*’ to Joy in the pub!

On 19th June, the rehearsal is given over to practising pieces for Joy. Jeff hands out the South African National Anthem. Debbie (alto) has lived in South Africa and knows it to symbolise unity. It is formed of all the main South African languages - Zulu, Bantu, Xhosa, Afrikaans, and one or two others. The only word that I recognise is “Africa”, which comes up several times. This adds to the tally of languages in which we have sung (Latin, German, French, Russian, Ukrainian, Polish, Swahili...).

Then we sing Jeff's Joy song to Beethoven's ‘*Ode to Joy*’. I think that it is incredibly good, and Jeff is a genius, until he lets on that it has been mostly composed by AI, not by him. The party went well on 22nd June, with music, speeches and tears.

At the next rehearsal, we practise hymns for Evensong on 29th June. Jeff announces that we have a date at Southwell Minster on 5-6th June 2026(!). We have been there before. Then we sing the psalm to a chant by the remarkably named Kellow John Pye.

Then it is on to the canticles by Thomas Atwood Walmisley (1814-1856), and the anthem ‘*Achieved is the Glorious Work*’, part of ‘*The Creation*’, by Haydn (1732- 1809), both of which we sang recently at St Albans. Jeff works hard on the Haydn, which is a cheerful piece which tempts “*con belto*” rendition, so Jeff asks us to remember that in the 18th century the men wore frock coats, frilly lace cuffs and the watchword was “elegant”. He says think “Dignity, Dignity, Dignity”. We repeat the piece less raucously, but it is such fun to sing that dignity can fly out the window, if we are not careful.

On 28th June, we have the Aylesbury Consort of Singers at the Coffee-Time Concert. Now, I would say that this is dangerous, as people might compare us. But we are us, doing our thing, and they are them doing something different. There is room for everyone in the singing world!

Then it is Evensong on 29th June at Saunderton, as it is the fifth Sunday of the month. We gather at 5pm to rehearse before the service begins at 6pm. As always, this last rehearsal is important to remind us what Jeff wants. All goes smoothly, until we practise ‘*Achieved is the Glorious Work*’, which calls to mind the line-up before the Grand National. The horses can't wait to fly, and then they run like crazy. Jeff reins us in with his watchword - “Dignity”! This works and we sing it more quietly: we can now hear each other and sing as a team. The service is lovely and the church not too hot despite the heat wave. The choir does not wear robes, to avoid heat-stroke, as the fabric of our robes is heavy.

On 3rd July, we start to practise for Choral Eucharist at Holy Trinity on 13th July. We have sung the Wiltshire Service by Richard Shephard (1949 –2021) several times, but not recently, and it takes some learning, particularly the ‘*Agnus Dei*’, which has few notes, but lasts a long time as the notes are sung veerrrryyy sloooowly. Jeff says that he finds it difficult to beat time slowly enough, and one choir member complains that she reached the end 20 seconds before everyone else.

And then we get new music from Jeff, ‘*O Sacrum Convivium*’ by Philip Stopford (born 1977 and who is taking over from Jeff as the DM of Aylesbury Choral Society in September). This also is slow. Someone asks Jeff how to pronounce Sacrum: is the first “a” short as in apple, or is it like say(crum)? Jeff says as in apple, the saycrum being a body part, so a different thing altogether.

On 9th July, we continue with the same pieces. Unusually, Jeff does not know one of the hymns set for Sunday. This leads somehow to an anecdote that Ralph Vaughan-Williams edited the New English Hymnal, and put many old favourites of questionable merit or sentiments into an appendix. He called this his “Chamber of Horrors”. It also leads to a discussion of where all the hymn books are going, as there were plenty a while ago, but now some of us have to share. They have been re-stocked from time to time by choir members at their own expense and donation from the PCC. Various theories are put forward, and searches proposed, so forgotten caches may be found. Sharing is hard, and affects the quality of the singing.

To encourage us in ‘*O Sacrum Convivium*’, Jeff tells us about an Indian woman, whose mother-in-law accused her of gluttony. She went to a guru, who trained her to live without eating or drinking, so she did neither for 50 years. Jeff asks us to imagine that we eat the ‘*Sacrum Convivium*’ as our first meal in 50 years as we sing it. Yum yum!

Then on to the Eucharist service on 13th July. The singing goes well and Jeff congratulates us. Afterwards we go out of the north door of the church to have a last of photo (*please see on the next page*) of the choir with Joy, who now has a date to emigrate to South Africa in August. Sad for us, but a new life in the sun for Joy and Colin with Jo!

Rob Hill

Choir Note - October 2025

Summer has ended, the nights are drawing in, and we have come on 11th September to our first rehearsal after our summer break. Now, I usually have completely forgotten how to sing at our first autumn rehearsal. I cannot read the music, sing the right notes - or any notes - or watch the conductor. But this year I went to Jeff’s excellent “Great Malvern Festival of Singing” organised through his company, They Shall Laugh and Sing, where we learned Brahms’ German ‘*Requiem*’, various Renaissance pieces for a Compline service, and Will Todd’s ‘*Mass in Blue*’. So I do feel that I might be able to sing the right notes in the right order at the right time.

We gather with joy, but without Joy, who has gone to South Africa. The next service at which we shall be singing is the Harvest Festival on 5th October. We will sing an anthem, new to the choir, by Sir Edward Elgar (1857-1934), ‘*Fear Not, O Land*’, but we are not starting on that just yet. Instead, we practise pieces for our visit over the weekend of 1st-2nd November to Bath Abbey. I have never sung there, but I have visited as a tourist, and marvelled at the sculpture on the west front, showing angels climbing and descending ladders. Bath is a lovely city, as most of you will know, but on a singing weekend there is no time for sight-seeing, unless you book an extra night in your hotel to get more time there.

We are also singing at a wedding on 20th September. We will sing Rutter’s ‘*Gaelic Blessing*’. We do not have enough sheet music to go round tonight, so we sing it through just once. This satisfies Jeff that we still remember it well, and we will pick it up quickly next week.

Then we sing ‘*Preces and Responses*’, new to us, by John Sanders OBE (1933-2003), an eminent musician, organist of Gloucester Cathedral from 1967 to 1994, and director of the Three Choirs Festival from 1968 to 1994. He wrote ‘*The Reproaches*’, which we sang at Easter. It is a gloomy, dramatic piece, and difficult to sing, but his ‘*Responses*’ are easier, and even sight-singable. They will be polished and burnished and rubbed to a sparkling finish, and perhaps even varnished by Jeff before we sing them at Bath.

I commented last month on Jeff handing out a selection of old and yellowing scores, which he had not tried before. One set of canticles was by Derek Holman (1931-2019), which I doubted we would see again. It was only sung briefly, and taken back in again. Jeff now produces it for us to sing in Bath, so I have to eat my words. We make a brave attempt to sing it by sight. We stop every so often to be corrected, but we don’t do badly. And I think that the piece will grow on us.

Someone questions what will be the temperature in Bath Abbey. A chorister recalls that on a previous visit they had the floor up to install under-floor heating, so it should be as warm as toast. Jeff says not necessarily, as there will probably be a man like Kip, running around trying to get it to work.

Then we sing the ‘*Gloria*’ from the Mozart (1756-1791) Mass in C Major which we sang recently in St Albans. This will be the music for our Eucharist Service in Bath. Jeff then remarked that it almost sings itself. And we haven’t lost our grip on it since St Albans. So, all is looking good for Bath, with plenty of practice time yet.

We are preparing for our visit to Bath, my favourite inland city in the UK, to sing at the Abbey on Saturday 1st and Sunday 2nd November. I have never sung there before, and it is a new venue for the choir. At the start of October, it feels that we have lots of time, but by the end of the month it is rushing towards us like an express train. This is normal. There is much music in a weekend of services, so we cannot learn all new music, but even pieces that we have done before have to be dusted off, polished, varnished and made to look as if new.

We have new *'Responses'* for our two Evensong services, and they were written by John Sanders OBE (1933-2003). I mentioned him last month. There is a Sanders' Society website on the internet. Perhaps his is not a household name, but clearly he was held in massive affection by those who worked with him and knew him. We sang another contemporary set of *'Responses'* by Gabriel Jackson recently. Did you hear them? It is great that composers are still finding exciting ways to express standard texts. The Sanders' set is more traditional than Jackson, and is easier to sing. Phew! Jeff often congratulates us on learning music more quickly than when he first took charge of the choir, but everything still takes time.

We are singing a wide mixture of styles. Philip Stopford's *'O Sacrum Convivium'* is slow and similar to Morten Lauridsen's music (always a hit with the choir). The faster music is Campbell's *'Sing We Merrily'*. Plus older music - we are singing Mozart's *Mass in C Major* again, which we sang at St Albans in May: you might remember, it's the piece which sings itself (almost). Then there are *'Canticles'* by Derek Holman (1933-2015) and by William Harris (1883-1973), and the rousing anthem *'O Thou the Central Orb'* by Charles Wood (1866-1926).

Alongside refining our Bath repertoire, we have to prepare for Harvest Festival on 5th October. Jeff introduces us to *'Fear Not, O Land'* by Edward Elgar (1857-1934). We run through it, and Jeff comments that it isn't one of Elgar's best pieces, but even what he wrote on an off day, is better than what most composers can do. Jeff has trouble every year finding anthems for Harvest Festival. We have sung *'Thou Visitest the Earth'* by Maurice Green (1695-1755) many times, so that is our default anthem. It remains useful when we have little time to rehearse, as one run through is usually enough. The Elgar is more tricky, but we pull through on the day.

Why do you think there are so few Harvest Anthems, while so many good Harvest Hymns? We sing *'We plough the fields and scatter'*, *'All creatures of our God and King'*, *'Come ye thankful people come'*, and *'Now thank we all our God'*, as we always do on Harvest Sunday. They are great hymns, but then we scrape the barrel for anthems: strange.

After Harvest Festival, we return to Bath music. Jeff is in the middle of moving house, so he asks us to start rehearsing without him. Cynthia warms us up with a run through of the Mozart *'Gloria'*, but in the middle of that Jeff bursts into the church, still brimming with energy, despite what must have been a hard day's sorting and packing. The Mozart is improving all the time, and then we renew our relationship with William Harris, but more work is needed. What, to me, makes it difficult is the trivial problem that the words are in places not right under the notes to which they are sung, but perhaps a centimetre to the left or right. This is slightly unnerving, but is soon overcome as one's memory returns from the last time that we sang it.

Rob Hill

Choir Notes - December 2025

On 16th October we continue to rehearse for our visit to Bath Abbey. We simply would not sing together so well if we did no cathedral visits, as Jeff goads us to sing better as such visits draw close. While we will never reach the heights of professional choirs (The Sixteen, the BBC Singers, Tenebrae, etc, etc), we cannot stop trying.

Jeff always wants us to look up. He tells us alarmingly about a woman who sang with her head down, looking at her music, and cut off the blood supply to her brain, and fainted, twice in one rehearsal. This is to encourage us to watch him like a hawk, or we might fall like nine pins: heads up, or you will collapse! Oh dear!

We practise *'O Sacrum Convivium'* by Philip Stopford (Born 1977). Jeff likes this, although unashamedly heart-felt. Philip Stopford has recently taken over from Jeff as Music Director of Aylesbury Choral Society.

We rehearse *'O Thou the Central Orb'* by Charles Wood (1866-1926). Jeff says that the problem here is making it sound as if it means something. It is a belter – the music encouraging us to sing loud rather than meaningfully. He asks us to imagine saints without bodies swimming about in the ether, so that the music floats.

The following week, we sing 'Sing we Merrily'. This has one trap near the end, where we sing "Allelu" on a long note, then stop, with a short silence before singing "Ya". Now this is dodgy, as it is easy to destroy the piece by carrying on the "Allelu" too long, or starting "Ya" early, so Jeff entirely and legitimately threatens death to anyone who sings in the rest. He may mean this, so it is best to watch him.

We have trouble with drifting flat in the sung Lord's Prayer in the 'Sander's Responses' – not an uncommon problem in long chant-type pieces - so Jeff asks us to sing a semi-tone above Cynthia's piano. Now, it is hard fighting against the piano, and I do not think Jeff wants us to achieve that, but we just edge up above flat, so it succeeds.

Our next delightful Coffee Time Concert at Holy Trinity is on Saturday 25th October. The choir members are all volunteers and pay no subscriptions, but we must cover expenses, through our 100 Club and these concerts. We are most grateful for everyone's support.

This concert is performed by The Caroline Ensemble. As we are approaching Remembrance Sunday, they sing songs on the theme of war, oppression and consolation. There are many songs that I have never heard, which are wonderful. I find it easiest to listen to pieces heard before, which include the marvelous 'When David Heard' of 1612, by Thomas Tomkins, about the death of King David's son Absalom in battle. Sad? No, absolutely devastating!

We have a last "home" rehearsal for Bath on Thursday 30th November, when we seem to be doing OK, but will be disabused when we meet on Saturday at the Abbey. Many mistakes will be corrected in the crucial last-ditch rehearsal before we go over the top (viz process into the Abbey at 5pm on Saturday for Evensong).

I go down on Friday as I love Bath. Friday night is Halloween, and the streets are full of ghouls, skeletons and vampires. I also see two Elvis Presley impersonators, or it might be one who has moved between sightings. And on the Saturday, the Rotary Club of Bath lets off a ton of fireworks down by the river. Do they do public parties every night here?

The Abbey rehearsal room is in the basement of a terraced house in a row to the right of the East front of the Abbey, separated from it by a narrow lane. It is the most extraordinary and beautiful practice room I have ever encountered. It is fitted out in wonderful carpentry, with a gallery at head height, with tiers of cupboards, all full of sheet music. But also wonderful is the corridor westwards from the rehearsal room, which eventually turns to the right and passes under the lane outside to come up into the abbey without going outside into the rain. It is all so well designed and executed!

The services all go well. The priest who leads both the Sunday Eucharist and Evensong services tells the Evensong congregation that they are in for a treat, as she had heard us in the morning.

Last in the month we have the Remembrance Sunday service at Holy Trinity at which we sing '*So they gave their Bodies*' by Peter Aston (1938-2013). We have sung this before, and I remember it as having been easy, but I now find it has a slightly difficult (for basses) middle section, and an odd last few notes. Jeff reviews the score, and then tells us to sing unison with the other parts, as it could be a mis-print in the music.

So, another month ends, full of fun and joyful singing! The next time that we sing will be at the Advent Carol Service at Saunderton church on Sunday 30th November.

Rob Hill

Choir Notes - January 2026

So, we approach Advent and Christmas, our busiest time of year. Our first event will be a service on 26th November at St Mary's, Princes Risborough, where Stuart King, their music director, is gathering a choir from choirs all over the district for the service of institution, induction and installation for the Revd Steve Benoy, the new Team Rector for the parish. We are singing '*God so Loved the World*' as an anthem. It is well known and is often sung by us at Easter as part of Stainer's '*Crucifixion*', but who knows what will happen when different choirs combine. Luckily, Jeff will conduct us.

Then we will have the Advent Carol Service at Saunderton on 30th November. I was absent on 13th November (sad, as I need all the practice that I can get). We practise on 20th November, but Jeff cannot hold a rehearsal on 27th, as his Lord William's Festival Choir will be rehearsing for their concert at the weekend. We will just have to arrive early for the Advent Carol Service and try to iron out any problems then.

On 20th November, we practise an arrangement of the lovely carol '*Gabriel's Message*', but not the arrangement by Willcocks, this time the one by Sting (aka Gordon Matthew Thomas Sumner, born 1951). Tricky, until you get your head round it, and then quite easy. Do I like it? Yes, but I love the Willcocks

version so much that it is hard to transfer my affections. Jeff says stop trying too hard, and you'll get it, which is true. He also suggests that we try to sound like Steeleye Span - you know, *'All Around My Hat'*.

Jeff disappears into the cold night outside, saying "I may be some time". I think this is a Captain Oates reference, but he re-appears quite quickly, explaining that he thought that he had left our next piece - *'Lo! How a Rose e'er Blooming'* by Bob Chilcott (born 1955, so younger than Sting) in his car. It is not there, so he borrows a spare. He says that Mr Chilcott takes loads of hymn tunes, turns them upside down and changes the words and makes them truly amazing. Ours is the first hymn from his Christmas oratorio.

Then Jeff says that he needs one more choir anthem for the carol service, and he allows us to vote by a show of hands between *'Tomorrow shall be my Dancing Day'*, *'Rose of Bethlehem'* or *'Little Donkey'*. I don't see any votes cast for anything except the first named choice, so we now have a full complement of carols.

Many of us participate in the institution and induction service for Revd Benoy as Team Rector of the Benefice of Risborough. A grand affair, with many prominent people present, including a good sprinkling of our own parishioners, with Dick Strange, in his capacity as Assistant Churchwarden, bidding welcome on behalf of Bledlow with Saunderton and Horsenden to Revd Steve and his wife, Alex. We proudly have the largest contingent of the choir, though I sit between two excellent bass singers from St John's, Lacey Green and St Dunstan's, Monks Risborough, so they must have good choirs too, I think. The large combined choir makes a fine sound, but perhaps not as loud as the band who also play and sing their songs.

Then it's the Advent Carol Service Saunderton on 30th November. We were not as well rehearsed as we normally are, due to time pressures. We do it well, as the singing is all fairly easy. Jeff's skills include knowing what we can learn in a limited time. He says what would have taken weeks to learn when he first took on the choir, we now do in a week or two.

Having left Advent behind, we start on the music for the Bledlow Carol Service in earnest, with *'The Holly and the Ivy'* arranged by John Gardner (1917-2011), and *'The Marvellous Birth'* by Chilcott - warm music for wintery nights.

Then we have Carols on the Green, arranged by members of the PCC and others, in front of The Lions on 11th December, with incredible hospitality from the lovely Lions, followed the next day with a private event at Oxmoor Farm at Hampden. At both we sing Christmas music, and both are very different from singing in church, as the audience is free to sing along, clap and cheer, and demonstrate that they are having a great time. We ended at Oxmoor Farm with a rousing rendition of *'We wish you a merry Christmas'*. It is great to help everyone into the Christmas spirit!

So, farewell to another year of singing fun and joy. What has been the high point? For me, singing in beautiful Bath Abbey, but amid so much beauty and pure loveliness, it is hard to choose.

Rob Hill

Choir Notes – February 2026 *Messenger*

We have made it through another year, going from good to great, and from fun to fantastic.

Last month I brought you up to date to the Advent Carol Service at Saunderton and a little beyond. The choir has a short hibernation after Christmas, so there is only a short period of time for me to cover, but it was a busy and intense musical season.

We met to rehearse on 18th December to practise for the service of Nine Lessons and Carols on 21st December, and we sang again at Holy Trinity on Christmas Day.

Jeff invited people to come and join the choir for the Christmas period, with no firm future commitment, so we were augmented by some fine singers, some of whom might stay (please?). Did you notice an increased volume and depth of sound?

We practise an arrangement of *'The Holly and the Ivy'*. Jeff tells us a bit about his childhood, when the boys in his Ashford choir all sang solos, so that the song seemed to last forever. We do six verses, with the key changing every two verses, and with the voice parts splitting each time. Jeff asks us to sing "Boom Boom" at the last chord in the manner of Basil Brush, but everyone knows Jeff too well to do it!

And we sing *'O Holy Night'* by Adolphe Adam (1803-1856), arranged by Sir John Rutter. Wikipedia comments that much of this prolific French composer's music was ephemeral for theatre, but he wrote ballets and operas which have survived. *'Minuit Chrétiens!'* (English - O Holy Night) is a setting of a poem by Placide Cappeau written in 1847, when abolitionism was strong in France. It includes:

*Truly He taught us to love one another;
His law is love and His gospel is peace.
Chains shall He break, for the slave is our brother;
And in His name all oppression shall cease.*

The singing at the service goes well, even ‘*Tomorrow shall be my Dancing Day*’ which is a bit tricky!

We have the annual choir party at Derek and Cathy’s house this year. Thank you very much, Derek and Cathy. Greg makes a speech, reflecting on the past year, and thanking Jeff, Cynthia and the many others who help to make us possible: [*this also includes you, Rob, for all your good work with Choir Notes each month - Editor*]. Jeff replied, thanking Greg, and looking forward to next year, when as well as visiting Chichester Cathedral, we shall be returning to sing an Evensong service at St Paul’s Cathedral in the autumn. Jeff has also secured three new venues – look out for the dates for when we are singing Evensongs at St George’s Chapel at Windsor Castle, and at the Chapel Royal at Hampton Court Palace, and also a weekend at Sherborne Abbey. Wow, a busy year!

And so to Christmas Day, which is always relaxed. We turn up for a short rehearsal of the anthem, ‘*Ding Dong Merrily on High!*’; we sing two notes, and Jeff says alright, I trust you! We sing our last carols of 2025, with only a few days to 2026, of course, and another year to fill with singing.

This year’s winter hibernation will be short, as we visit Chichester Cathedral on 21st and 22nd February to sing Saturday’s Evensong, and three services on Sunday. We do not yet have the music or know what it will be, but four services is a lot of music to learn in less than two months. Great!

Rob Hill