

Biddulph Male Voice Choir - Midlands North Group- Ian Barber

‘100 years of singing 1922-2022

Our choir was founded in May 1922 by brothers Edward and Thomas Roberts, local builders, who sang in their local Methodist church choir in Station Road, Biddulph. The choir members were all drawn from the local area and comprised of Miners, Potters, and Steel workers, many of whom sang in church choirs. Although male voice choir singing was nothing new, this was the only choir in the Biddulph area at the time. These were hard times just after the Great War, and it's thought that many joined a male voice choir to rediscover the feelings of friendship, fellowship, and camaraderie missing in their lives since the end of the war. These feelings are still so important today and are found in abundance in all male voice choirs.

The Choir's logo adopted in 1993 features the local landmark Mow Cop Castle and the Staffordshire Knot, both symbols of the steadfastness and stability of North Staffordshire, which like the choir has weathered the years and withstood the test of time. The Staffordshire Knot dates from 750-850 AD, and is the heraldic badge of the 'Stafford' family, who through Morag, Lady Stafford, approved its use by the choir. It remains unconfirmed that the initial purpose of the knot was to enable the Sherriff to hang three criminals in one go.

With the choir formed, Ed became its first conductor until he was tragically killed in a road accident on 9 July 1924. His brother Tom then succeeded him in the role and the following year led the choir to its first award, top prize at the 'Wesleyan Eisteddfod' in Talke, Stoke-on-Trent, deposing the choir who had won the championship for the previous four years running – some achievement. Tom continued in his role as conductor for a further fourteen years when in 1937 a rift in the affairs of the choir led him to being replaced by Tom Johnson.

During the years 1937-1957 the choir expanded considerably and achieved much success in both competition and concert hall. It is recorded that between 1939 and 1949, the choir gave a legendary 390 concerts to raise funds for 'Forces comforts' and aids to charities. Numerous broadcasts were also made, nine London theatre concerts were given, and the choir represented Staffordshire at a choral festival at Harringay, London, in 1947. The choir was 'Congratulated not only for the way it had kept together during the difficult war years, but even more so for its sustained efforts on behalf of local charities.....its services are in constant demand'.

In the years that followed, the choir's fortunes declined with the changes in the pattern of public entertainment and tastes. The spirit of fellowship which is so much a feature of any choir must have been sorely tested, but the choir managed to hold together over the next twelve years in spite of having no less than eight conductors and a membership of less than twenty.

In 1969 a local music teacher Gwenda Jones was persuaded to fill in the conductor's job on a temporary basis. This she agreed to do and stayed with the choir until her retirement in 2013! Under her leadership the choir's membership rose to over eighty members.

There then followed a 'purple patch' for the choir during which they were regularly performing twenty concerts a year. In 1970 the choir started to present an annual concert series at the prestigious Victoria Hall in Hanley, Stoke-on-Trent which ran for over forty years. These concerts saw the choir sharing the stage with some of the most prestigious military and civilian bands in the UK.

From 1976 the choir enjoyed concert tours to several European countries including Italy, Germany, Holland, Norway, Switzerland and Austria and enjoyed considerable success in many competitions including a third place at the Llangollen International Eisteddfod. The choir also organized and ran a successful music festival attracting musicians and choirs from around the UK.

Following the resignation of Gwenda Jones after more than forty years, the choir appointed local musician Daniel Keen as musical director in 2013, and continued with its regular concert programme including singing at the Anglo Welsh Festival of Choirs at St. David's Hall in Cardiff and at Birmingham Town Hall.

In 2017 the choir appointed Anthony Marks as its musical director, following Daniel's resignation, and under his guidance the choir continues to flourish having performed again in Cardiff in 2018 and being engaged for many concerts locally, raising considerable sums for charity.

Like so many more, the choir was silenced during the Covid pandemic and the following lockdowns, and sadly lost several members to illness during this time. However, the choir is now back to full face to face rehearsals and preparing for what appears to be a very busy Centenary Year of concerts, including a memorial concert for those choristers who sadly died during the pandemic. The highlight of the year will be the Centenary concert in September when we will again be sharing the stage with one of the UK's top brass bands.

Given the fact that more popular music is now being arranged for male voice choirs, and that people now appear to be slowly returning to live performances, the choir is looking forward to the future, and possibly another '100 years of singing'