



ALBAN NOTES

St Albans Cathedral Ex-Choristers Association

THE CATHEDRAL AND ABBEY CHURCH OF ST. ALBAN

Affiliated to the Federation of Cathedral Old Choristers Associations

ST. ALBANS
CATHEDRAL

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Message from the Chairman

The last year has been one I don't think any of us will forget in a hurry, a very strange and challenging 12 months which no-one could have predicted. Covid-19 has had a bigger impact on all our lives than we ever could have imagined, but at last the signs of returning to a new normal are in sight. We are all likely to have either been directly or indirectly affected by the virus and perhaps have been poorly as a result or known people who have been. I hope you are all in good or improving health now and have taken or intend to take advantage of the vaccination programme.

As restrictions start to be relaxed over the coming weeks it will be interesting to see how the familiar daily statistics alter, particularly once we are permitted to travel abroad, and international borders are relaxed. Time to remain cautious and remember the basics of 'hands, face, space' as this pandemic is far from over but hopefully becoming more controlled.

To our younger members, those who have had important GCSE or A level exams this year or last, and to those at University, I congratulate you on coping with the ever-changing rules and uncertainty which cannot have been easy. You've got this far and life will become easier as we learn more about this virus – 'stay positive and test negative'!!

Like much of the UK population, our ECA committee has become familiar with Zoom and have held a couple of successful meetings online. Your committee decided to make a donation to the St. Albans Cathedral Music Trust, well aware of the unexpected and challenging financial situation they found themselves in. We have created a [new page on our website](#), should you also wish to contribute and learn more about how donations support music in the Cathedral.

There have been shocking stories in the national news over recent months about Cathedrals and choir schools in dire straits due to a lack of income but I was pleased to read the following:

"St Albans Cathedral was grateful to the Cathedral Choirs' Emergency Fund for a grant of £26,650 to support its core music costs for the first half of 2021, in the light of much reduced income due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This grant, along with the generosity of donors and supporters, has been critical to enabling the Cathedral's music to continue despite the many challenges faced this year."

You may remember we decided not to hold an AGM last year due to the unfamiliar and tough restrictions in place, but this year an AGM will go ahead in June or July – further details will follow. I hope to hold it in person in the Deanery but will stream live via Zoom for those unable to travel.



The Very Revd Dr Jeffrey John
Patron of the ECA

Image © Paul Jellings



I am grateful to all contributors to this edition of Alban Notes, and particularly to Andrew Lucas who continues to keep us well informed about life in the Cathedral for the choristers. Huge achievements have been accomplished throughout the lockdowns by the St. Albans Cathedral Music Trust and the Cathedral clergy, who have maintained regular live streamed services. I suspect they were viewed live by many, and perhaps even more catching up later.

I was pleased to watch live the farewell services for our Patron, the Dean of St. Albans, the Very Revd Dr **Jeffrey John**. He has moved to St. George's Anglican Church, Paris to take up the post of Associate Chaplain after 17 years at St. Albans. He has been instrumental during his time here with an impressive list of achievements ensuring the Cathedral is even more welcoming to visitors. He has been a true supporter of the ECA, always willing to give advice when required and a regular attendee at our meetings. He will be sorely missed but assures me any of us are welcome to visit him in Paris - and to also expect him back as he intends to retire to St. Albans at some point.

As always, I hope you enjoy reading Alban Notes and that it provides a connection for you to St. Albans. Do please get in touch if you have any news to share or to tell us what you want included in future editions. In the meantime, I send you my very best wishes and hope you enjoy more freedom over the coming months, with some better weather.

Richard Lilley

Chairman

Choir News

In the last update I explained the plan for the term with choristers meeting and rehearsing only online, whilst principal Sunday services were sung by a small group of the lay clerks and a pool of professional and semi-professional sopranos. All these services were only available online because we wanted to continue choral worship in some form and the regulations prevented the public being present if there was any choral singing. Throughout this lockdown, though, the cathedral's daily said services were always open to anyone who wished to attend.

Just before Passiontide in March the regulations eased slightly and we decided to open the main Sunday morning services to the congregation and this required a reduction in the number of singers to 3. It was very strange during this time to say goodbye to our wonderful Dean, Jeffrey John, in a locked cathedral with the congregation still online. For three weekends we maintained this discipline and it was enjoyable to do, but a full choral service was still offered each week - now Evensong rather than a Eucharist.

Two days before Holy Week the guidance changed yet again. We had some inkling that there would be a relaxation and had planned to increase to 4 singers for Holy Week. We decided to stick with this plan and all the regular Holy Week services were sung by a quartet but we decided to push the boat out on Easter Day - the first Holy Week and Easter with live music for two years. At the end of the 9.30 Parish Eucharist the Bishop and clergy, choir and congregation processed out (socially distanced, of course) into the sunshine outside the west front and all sang together 'Thine be the glory' with great enthusiasm. The clergy got the bit between their teeth and ended up a few words ahead of the choir, with wicked twinkle in the eye, but no one minded. It was the first communal singing at the cathedral since March last year and it was so joyful!

And even better, the choristers are now back! We are singing our full pattern of services but with slightly reduced forces - all the choristers but only 6 men at all weekend services for the time being. We hope that by the end of May we will be able to use all the lay clerks.

Sadly we will be saying goodbye to one of our most cherished members of the choir, lay clerk **David Martin-Smith** at Evensong on 23rd May. David (or DMS as he's always been known) joined the choir some 35 years ago in Colin Walsh's time and has almost seen off three Masters of the Music. His dedication to the choir, faultless commitment and wonderfully wicked sense of humour, seen in all its splendour at choir camp, has endeared him to generations of lay clerks and choristers. Fortunately he's left behind a genetic replica with his son Oliver, who occasionally comes back to sing with us, most notably most weekends in the last lockdown.

Hopefully by September we will be operating as normal, using the Song School again and the congregation will be singing hymns with us, hopefully with greater gusto now that they realise what they have been missing!

Andrew Lucas

Master of the Music

Member News

*Former chorister **Nina Vinther**, who is working at the Cathedral as the Youth and Music Intern, shares her experiences of new technology during the pandemic.*

When I started singing in St Albans Abbey Girls Choir as a probationer, I definitely didn't imagine that I'd be back 15 years later be-masked, bemused, and surrounded by high-tech recording equipment. It would seem that necessity really is the mother of all invention.

Music-making and Covid are far from a match made in fairest heaven. However, whilst most of us musicians have been guilty of sighing and saying on at least a few occasions 'It's just not the same', we've also been begrudgingly grateful for the technology which has allowed us to reach new audiences, to make worship accessible to people for whom services may previously have been inaccessible, and to keep the music playing throughout most of lockdown. I'm certainly not taking anything for granted.

It's been fantastic to watch members of the *Abbey Singers* getting involved 'backstage', growing in confidence and learning new skills. From fixing mics to uploading video content post livestreams, they're becoming resilient 21st century musicians. (I've also enjoyed the possibilities afforded by Zoom to be more creative with the St Albans Young Singers, and have loved hearing the choristers perform on their instruments from the safety of their living rooms. They're an extremely talented bunch, which is easily forgotten in the rush to prepare for a demanding schedule of term-time services).

By using this time wisely and coming together as a musical community, and with the generous support of the Music Trust, we've been fortunate enough not to have to hang up our harps and weep.

Other Member News

It has been announced that former Assistant Master of the Music **Simon Johnson** has been appointed as Master of Music at Westminster Cathedral. He has been organist and assistant director of music at St Paul's Cathedral since 2008 and will take up his new post on 1 September 2021. He will join former Organ Scholar **Marco Sever** who took up his post as Organ Scholar of Westminster Cathedral last September.

ECA members also feature in changes of personnel at the St Albans Cathedral Music Trust. Former alto lay clerk, Professor **Tim Blinks** is standing down as a Trustee after moving to the West Country and former Organ Scholar **Richard Pinel** (now Director of Music at Jesus College, Cambridge) has been appointed as a Trustee.

500th Anniversary of Robert Fayrfax

Honorary Life Member **David Ireson** celebrates this influential English church musician in the 500th anniversary year of his death. David is a St Albans Cathedral Music Trust Patron and director of The Fayrfax Consort.

If you stand at the top of the steps up to the Presbytery in the Cathedral you will find (under a mat) a memorial brass to *Robert Fayrfax*. Since most of the other memorials there are to Abbots this shows how highly he was regarded when he died in 1521. This year (2021) therefore is the five hundredth anniversary of his death.

The importance of the Abbey at this time meant that it employed the best masons, carpenters, craftsmen and of course musicians – and Fayrfax was one of the foremost musicians in the country during the reigns of both Henry VII and Henry VIII. We know that he worked at the Abbey between 1498 and 1502 and was here at the time of his death so must have had strong links with St Albans.



A modern copy of Robert Fayrfax's brass in the Presbytery. © Cathedral Archives

Before the Reformation the day to day music in the Abbey was provided by the monks – composers like Fayrfax were only commissioned to write music for special occasions and professional singers would have been employed to perform these pieces. Fayrfax held the title of Master of the Music but the job was very different from today's. He was Master of the Children at the Chapel Royal and was succeeded by William Cornysh in 1511. Interestingly, Fayrfax and Cornysh seemed to begin the tradition of pairs of composers – Tallis and Byrd, Tomkins and Gibbons, and Britten and Tippett in our own times.

Robert Fayrfax was born in Deeping Gate in Lincolnshire on 23 April 1464. He seems to have won the patronage of the leading cultural figure of Henry VII's court, the king's mother Lady Margaret Beaufort. In 1497, he became a Gentleman of the Chapel Royal (when he was in his early thirties). The Chapel Royal was the household choir of the monarch and accompanied them wherever they went. He was called 'the leading figure in the musical establishment of his day' and 'the most admired composer of his generation' and his connection with St Albans meant that the Abbey was known for its music during his lifetime.

He was granted a post at the Chapel of Snodhill Castle in Herefordshire which was a source of income for him and he also had income from the monasteries of Selby in Yorkshire and Stanley in Wiltshire. He remained a Gentleman of the Chapel Royal until his death. He gained the degree of Bachelor of Music from Cambridge University in 1501 and then two doctorates in music, firstly from Cambridge in 1504 and then Oxford in 1511.

We know that he sang at the funerals of both Prince Edmund, the third son of Henry VII and his wife Elizabeth in 1503. He sang at the funeral of Henry VII and the coronation of Henry VIII and accompanied him to the Field of the Cloth of Gold in 1520. He served Henry VII, our first Tudor monarch, for twenty years and remained in the service of his son. Henry VIII, an accomplished musician himself, clearly admired Fayrfax's talents and granted him numerous benefices for the last decades of his life. He also paid him handsomely each New Year's day from 1516 to 1519 for books of music, for Fayrfax wrote secular as well as sacred music.

He and Cornysh went to France with the choir of the Chapel Royal on a propaganda trip in 1513 and were both at the Field of the Cloth of Gold in 1520. This was a sort of political summit held in France not far from Calais. It was also a massive piece of PR or personal one-upmanship on the part of Henry VIII who had gone to meet Francis I. They were both young, flamboyant and handsome at the time and were really having a competition to see who was the top king in Europe. They were supposedly trying to form an alliance but the Field of the Cloth of Gold (as you can imagine from how it went down in history) is best remembered for the ostentation of both kings.

The meeting lasted for three weeks during which each tried to outdo the other with the glitz and glamour of their own courts. Henry took with him the entire English court, many musicians – the Gentlemen of the Chapel Royal included – and gave extraordinary feasts to impress his guests. The menu for one such meal included dolphin, porpoise, lark's tongues, swan and wild boar. There was even a gold fountain which had separate spouts for claret, spiced wine and water on constant stream. They also took with them jewelled tents, sumptuous costumes and even an entire weapons foundry (which was rebuilt on site to provide weapons for jousting).

Compared with the Field of the Cloth of Gold, today's oligarchs with their superyachts look pretty ordinary. The result of the Field of the Cloth of Gold? Political achievement - nil; economic achievement - nearly bankrupted both nations; entertainment value - considerable, and probably a huge hangover for all concerned. I suppose you could say that it was one of the perks of being a court musician.

Fayrfax's music was included in the Eton Choirbook. This was a richly illuminated collection of the best of sacred music composed in the late fifteenth century for use at Eton College and was compiled between 1500 and 1505. It was one of the few collections of Latin liturgical music to survive the Reformation and hence is an important source. As with any collection or anthology it contains what was considered to be the finest music.

Fayrfax wrote one Mass specifically for St Albans - the Albanus Mass. There was a fascinating story about this piece because it was sung in 1921 as part of the 400th anniversary celebrations. One of the canons, walking past the Cathedral one evening, heard some choral music being sung inside and mentioned to the organist who he met at a chapter sherry party how much he liked the music. The organist told him that he must be mistaken as there was no choir practice on the night in question but when the Mass was sung in the service the canon recognised it as being what he had heard on his walk. Who knows? It's a nice story anyway.

On a personal note, when I started my own group it was called The Fayrfax Consort - not really because I wanted to perform his music but because of the St Albans connection. When I left the cathedral choir Hazel and I endowed the Fayrfax Layclerkship both to celebrate, and as a memorial to, St Albans' most famous Tudor musician.

On **Sunday 24 October 2021** (the day after the anniversary of his death) I will be giving a short talk about Fayrfax in the Lady chapel and this will be illustrated by the early music group *Ensemble Pro Victoria* who will then sing Vespers in the cathedral, so **please save the date** in your diaries.

FCOCA News

The Federation of Cathedral Old Choristers' Association is under a new chairmanship, with Nick Hodges having taken over from Alastair Pollard recently. Nick can be e-mailed directly at chairman@fcoca.org.uk and is keen to know what you want from the federation.

He is disappointed to report that the 2021 annual federation festival, which was due to take place in Ely this October is being postponed until 2022. The Society of Ely Choristers came to the difficult decision recently, due to the uncertainties around Covid-19.

Nick is keen to reach out to all associate members, of which we are one, and make changes to the FCOCA branding and membership benefits, in order to attract a wider and younger membership.

ECA Website - Facebook - Twitter

We hope you are familiar with our website (StAlbansECA.org) and [Facebook page](#) which have been around for some time. You can also follow us on Twitter [@StAlbansECA](#).