



ALBAN NOTES

ST. ALBANS
CATHEDRAL

St Albans Cathedral Ex-Choristers Association
THE CATHEDRAL AND ABBEY CHURCH OF ST. ALBAN

Affiliated to the Federation of Cathedral Old Choristers Associations

Issue 55 Autumn Term 2023

A Note from your Hon Secretary

Dear Friends and Fellow Ex-Choristers,

I invite everyone to check their diaries for **15th June 2024**. Alongside our AGM, we are planning a reunion in St Albans to coincide with an event in the Abbey to mark the retirement of Andrew Lucas as Master of the Music since 1998. We plan a social event, as well as attending a special valedictory Evensong for Andrew.



Simon Trott
Hon Secretary

We are hoping to attract a strong attendance of ECA members, but also invite commemorative stories and tributes from ex-choristers who worked under Andrew (please send to simon.trott@stalbanseca.org).

Watch out for more details in a future ECA communication!

In this issue, we have included an interesting and amusing article about George Gaffe, former Organist and Master of the Choristers at St Albans by our ECA committee member Trevor Jarvis. Trevor is a research officer at the RSCM and has co-authored a book on the life and works of a selection of "lesser known" Victorian and Edwardian church musicians, entitled "They fly forgotten as a dream..." (RSCM 2020).

I'm hoping that those of you who I sang with in the Abbey over 50 years ago may recognise me – the photo above is me setting off to sing in the chorus for Brahms Requiem with my local choral society. Remember the anthem "How Lovely are thy Dwellings Fair"?

Do you still sing? No? Well, why not look up your local choral society, you may even not have to audition!

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The Life of George Gaffe

Organist & Master of the Choristers of St Albans Abbey 1880-1907

From **Trevor Jarvis** (CC 1956 to 1961)

In his book *The Succession of Organists* (Oxford, 1991), Watkins Shaw gives us little biographical information concerning George Gaffe beyond the fact that he was '...one of Zechariah Buck's choristers and artiled pupils at Norwich.' Malcolm Bury, in his excellent book *Alban Notes – The Choirs and Musicians of St Albans Cathedral* (Rhinegold, 2016) gives us more, especially of his time as organist at St Albans Abbey.





Photo from 1900

Dr. George Gaffe with The Dean, The Very Reverend Walter John Lawrence (1840 – 1914), Canon Glossop, Rev. Philip Deedes, Rev. Ernest Spencer Phillips and Rev. George Castleden.

Nevertheless, Gaffe deserves further consideration, being a product of Norwich Cathedral Choir during the highly successful but eccentric tenure of the organist Zechariah Buck. It is thanks to Gaffe's recollections in Frederick Kitton's book *Zechariah Buck – A Centenary Memoir* (Jarrold & Sons, 1899) – now sadly out of print – that we get such a graphic account of Buck's training methods with his choristers, resulting in a choir that he ...'brought to such a high state of perfection that it merited universal distinction' (quote from Kitton).

The results Buck obtained from his boys were remarkable, but at a cost. Although Buck was an indifferent organist, he was a gifted teacher, and a number of his former choristers who went on to become his articulated pupils, subsequently held significant positions in chapels, churches and cathedrals, namely Gaffe (St Albans), Arthur Mann (King's College, Cambridge), Philip Armes (Chichester and Durham Cathedrals) and Alfred Gaul (St Augustine's, Birmingham) to name but a few.

George Gaffe was born at Cawston, Norfolk – a village about 11 miles from Norwich – on 27th July 1849. He became a "trial boy" in Norwich Cathedral choir when he was eight, his father having taken him to Dr Buck for a voice trial, and was appointed a full chorister a year later, in 1858. At some stage the family moved to Thorpe, on the southern edge of the city, as Gaffe mentions the daily journey he had to make, presumably on foot, of nearly 2 miles to the cathedral for choir practice.

Gaffe asserts that Buck may well have been the originator of a system using "trial boys" who formed a separate choir singing in churches round the city on Sundays and, when a vacancy occurred amongst the full choristers, Buck would select the best trial boy to be promoted. Other cathedrals adopted a similar scheme, naming such boys "probationers".

Gaffe details the chorister's daily schedule and mentions the tongue exercise which began each boys' practice, followed by vocal "shake" exercises and scale practice, which he described as '...a kind of vocal treadmill'. Between three and five hours a day was spent in singing lessons, together with two daily sung services (Matins and Evensong), meant that there was little time left in the day for school work. Gaffe noted that '...this played sad havoc with the educational part of our day's work, although we did not mind it then – in fact, we rather liked it'.

He goes on to describe the methods Buck used to obtain the correct open mouth position, and the "tongue exercises": 'In order to achieve the correct flat tongue position, Buck would insert either a pencil or his fingers in the boy's mouth. When singing, he insisted that six teeth should be seen, both top and bottom. So frequently did he utter this particular instruction, he used to say that ...after his death the words "show six teeth" would be found engraved on his heart!'

Even though the regime was strict and the hours long, the choristers still found time to misbehave as other boys. The choir register for 1860-1862 records that on April 26th 1860: "Gaffe and Fiddy behaved very ill" and, on May 5th, another boy... "Mann (later of King's College) gave much trouble this evening". Gaffe and Mann became firm friends during their chorister days, and remained so for the rest of their lives.

In 1862, at the age of 13, Gaffe was articled to Dr Buck for a period of seven years. Initially he was both singing with the choir, and also playing the organ. This involved processing in with his fellow choristers at the start of the service, singing the psalms, and then going up to the organ to play for the rest of the service. This presupposes that he still had his treble voice at this stage.

He showed so much promise as an organist that Buck invited him to stay on after his articles came to an end, as a paid assistant for a further 5 years. When he became Senior Assistant, Buck asked Gaffe to be in charge of the two Norwich boys [Smith and Self] who had been selected to sing the soprano and contralto solos at a high-profile performance of Bach's St Matthew Passion conducted by Joseph Barnby at Westminster Abbey in 1872. The same year Gaffe gained his FCO (the forerunner of the FRCO). He left Norwich in 1874 to take up the post of organist at Oswestry Parish Church. Here he remained until 1880, when he moved on to St Albans Cathedral. (Read Malcolm Bury's book for further information.)

Dr Buck died in 1879. Such was the regard in which Buck's articled pupils held him that in 1884 George Gaffe and Arthur Mann proposed that his old pupils should foregather with the purpose of dining together and sharing old memories of their teacher. They organised the event for the following year, dining at the Maid's Head Hotel in Norwich, which was attended by 17 articled pupils. This annual event continued for a number of years. Arthur Mann, a friend since boyhood, attended George Gaffe's funeral at St Albans in 1907.

It is interesting to speculate to what extent Gaffe may have employed Buck's somewhat individualistic choir-training methods and florid style of singing when training the St Albans choristers. In light of Gaffe's comment "...a vocal treadmill", perhaps not at all!

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Choir News

Cathedral Choir

The Cathedral Choir had an exciting Summer Term in 2023. After months of planning and hard work by the chorister parents, aided by a generous donation from the Music Trust, the Cathedral Choir (boys & men) went on tour to Italy in May.

As in 2013 and 2019 we were based in the city of Fano, Marche and generously hosted by the parish of San Paolo and their priest Don Francesco. We stayed in the splendid diocesan retreat centre that is a grand 18th century building situated in the picturesque hills a few km outside the centre of Fano, complete with its own domed church, that was originally built as a stopping place giving hospitality to passing knights templar.

After a rather difficult and protracted journey out starting at 7am on a Friday, Brussels airport became our temporary second home and we finally arrived in Fano just before dawn, only 9 hours later than planned! Nevertheless, we stuck to our schedule and sang a rather good concert in San Paolo, Fano, on that Saturday evening, Mass on Sunday morning in the packed Basilica of the Holy House in Loreto on the feast of Pentecost, Evensong back in the centre of Fano at the diocesan conference centre (a former seminary) which included a prelude and a short concert at the end shared with the choir of Fano cathedral.

The following day the choristers attended a secondary school in Fano and shared experiences in both music and school life, before setting off for the nearby city of Pesaro (the birthplace of Rossini) where we sang our second full concert in the wonderfully resonant acoustic of the cathedral. In all this we were treated royally and ate wonderful meals every day. I can safely say that Fano is very much the choir's 'happy place'. We were accompanied by Dean Jo, Julia, our lead chaperone and two very helpful and willing parents.

Not long after we returned from Italy our recording of Anton Bruckner's motets (see here - [First Hand Records](#)), recorded in the height of the heat wave in July 2022, was released and we were delighted to discover that it had received fantastic reviews in both the Gramophone Magazine (editor's Choice) and the BBC Music Magazine. A real feather in our cap!

The summer term was rounded off with a rousing performance of Berlioz's epic setting of the Te Deum in a concert with The Britten Sinfonia and St Albans Bach Choir with the senior choristers of both choirs singing the children's choir part.

We waved goodbye to just one chorister, Benedict Moriarty at the end of the summer, which made the start of the Autumn Term very plain sailing indeed.

The boys had the excitement of being part of a filming session in the Cathedral for a BBC production (wearing wigs!) for an [episode of "Dodger" titled "Coronation"](#) which was broadcast on 29th November.

In the Autumn Term we had our usual round of special services: the annual services of Remembrance (Durufle's Requiem) and the Justice Service in November were followed by the short push on to Christmas with the Advent Procession and Christmas Carol Services.



One of the Carol Services included a full evacuation of the Cathedral while the choir sang "Silent Night" at the beginning of the service, when the massed candles of the congregation set off the fire alarm. Two fire engines arrived in Sumpter Yard and, once the all clear was given, we started again – without candles!

Term ended with two services (Vespers and Midnight Mass) on Christmas Eve before the girls choir took over for the two services on Christmas morning. Thrown into the middle of all that, the senior boys and girls sang in the Royal Albert Hall on December 6th in two Christmas concerts with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by John Rutter.

We are very pleased that Oliver Morrell has stayed on as our organ scholar for a second year and his work with the Abbey Singers has seen them flourish and they sang for various Evensongs and one of the Carols on the Hour services this year.

Andrew Lucas

Master of the Music

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Cathedral Girls Choir

Elizabeth Poston recording – Cathedral Girls Choir & Lay Clerks, July 2023

After the end of the Summer Term the Cathedral Girls Choir and Lay Clerks made a recording of carols and anthems by Hertfordshire composer Elizabeth Poston, which was generously supported by St Albans Cathedral Music Trust and the Fraternity of the Friends of St Albans Abbey.

Recording sessions provide an excellent opportunity to 'fly the flag' for the Cathedral's music. This album was recorded for Naxos Records – it is the seventh album that the choirs have made for this prestigious label. It will be released internationally on 24 November and copies will be available in the Cathedral Shop.

Apart from the well-known carol Jesus Christ the Apple Tree, Elizabeth Poston's music has been extremely under-represented in recordings; this album is the first release solely devoted to her important contribution to British choral music. It's an important release for the rich heritage of music-making in Hertfordshire, and by making Poston's oeuvre better known it will give choirs internationally the opportunity to continue to diversify their repertoire.

Almost all the works included are receiving their first recordings: these include a very attractive Christmas sequence The Nativity, originally composed for BBC Radio. The professional soloists in this work all have St Albans connections: Nina Vinther, Isabelle Blain and Oliver Martin-Smith are all former St Albans choristers, and Alexandra McPhee is one of the choir's regular singing teachers. Many of the works have already become firm favourites amongst the choristers.

Any recording project is the culmination of many months focused and detailed preparation, and the intensive recording sessions (four consecutive evenings) entailed a huge amount of stamina and concentration. The choristers stepped up to the mark brilliantly, singing extremely well throughout and gaining a huge amount from the experience. The Lay Clerks' goodwill,



professionalism and excellent singing was also a huge support to the choristers, and Oliver Morrell, Organ Scholar, accompanied beautifully at the cathedral organ.

Earlier in the year the girls were involved with a performance of Bach's St Matthew Passion with The Bach Choir at the Royal Festival Hall in April, and also sang Evensong in May at St Paul's Cathedral. They also enjoyed participating in John Rutter's Christmas Concerts at the Royal Albert Hall. The choir has plans for a short tour to Hildesheim, Germany, in May 2024 to sing at Hildesheim Cathedral and in Hanover. This comes a number of years after the Cathedral Choir's visit to take part in jubilee celebrations of Hildesheim diocese.

Tom Winpenny

Assistant Master of the Music

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Member News

We welcome six new members valedicted last July: **Alisha Ardeshta, Benedict Moriaty, Sarah Collyer, Gabrielle Delderfield, Grace Kent** and **Anisha Narula**.

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Wedding

Laura Hicks (AGC 1997 to 2003) and **Alex Johnston** (CC 1997 to 2003) and were married on 29th July 2023 in the Lady Chapel of the Cathedral.

Laura said: *"It was really special to get married in a place that was so special for both of us and even better to have an amazing choir of ex-choristers and lay clerks."*

We send them both our very best wishes.



Laura & Alex

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Obituaries

It was with sadness that we learned in May of the passing of **John Tournay**.

John began as a chorister in 1943 until 1950 and was an alto lay clerk from 1958 to 1969. He was an active supporter of the ECA and served on the committee for a number of years.

His funeral, held at St. Barnabus Church, Linslade, Leighton Buzzard on 23rd May, was well attended by many ECA members.



John Tournay

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ECA Website - Facebook - Twitter

We hope you are familiar with our website (StAlbansECA.org) and [Facebook page](#) which have been around for some time. A recent addition to our social media profile is that of our very own Twitter account. Please feel free to follow, like, re-tweet and comment, or just keep up to date [@StAlbansECA](#).

Dates for the Diary

15th June 2024

Ex-Choristers Evensong and AGM.

