

A HISTORY OF PHILOMUSICA OF GLOUCESTERSHIRE AND WORCESTERSHIRE

by Dr. Liz Heighway, Archivist of Philomusica.

This letter was printed in the *Gloucester Citizen* on March 10th, 1967.

Sir. - I read in your Gazette last week a letter from James Walkley, thanking you for your report on St. Luke's Passion, in Wotton Church. I was one of the meagre handful in the church on February 25. How the Philomusica Society put over such a tremendous performance to a nearly-empty church must remain a mystery. It was their first performance (they were only formed last year). They must have been really disappointed. It was not shown in their voices. I go to every choir performance in Wotton Church and I've never heard such beautiful music.

S. A. Smith.⁽¹⁾

Mr. Smith's impressions will chime with anyone who has had the pleasure of singing with Philomusica during the last fifty years. Philomusica has performed great standard works, like *Messiah*, *The Apostles*, *Gerontius* and *The Kingdom*, for example, but we have also performed comparatively obscure pieces (like the *St Luke Passion*) and new works, such as the premier of Richard Knight's *The Crown of Life* in 2000, Chris Williams's *Tsunami Requiem* in 2014, and works by several members of Philomusica. We have occasionally brought together some memorable performances with comparatively few rehearsals – perhaps this is due in part to the dedication of its conductor and the willingness to attend rehearsals the society inspires in its singers, and we have certainly sung to a “nearly-empty church” once or twice. The record is set by one carol concert in Oxstalls (a domestic science college in Gloucester, which is now part of the University of Gloucester), where the audience consisted of just one man – who at least stayed to the end of the performance. I hope that we gave as good a performance then as we did in Onze-Lieve-Vrouwekerk (Our Lady's Church) in 2006, to a full house and a standing ovation. As a registered charity, we have raised tens of thousands of pounds over the years for many charitable causes, from contributions to the repair of churches and organs to Maggie's Cancer Care, from the Royal Lifeboat Institution and Winston's Wish to the Royal British Legion. And we sing together because we love music and want to share it.

Part 1 – The Beginning.

In the early sixties, a student named James Cowley who was studying organ under Herbert Sumsion at Gloucester Cathedral, asked James Walkley, a gifted bass and former lay clerk at Gloucester, who now lived in Cheltenham and had a bicycle sales and repair business on Tewkesbury Road, to join his small choir to sing at a service in St Alban's in Stroud, and a friendship began. James Walkley had already been involved with the foundation of Cheltenham Bach Choir in 1947. James Cowley and his choir then combined with James Walkley and some of his friends to sing Christmas and Easter works in Stroud Parish Church and later sang alongside Bishops Cleeve Choral Society.



James Walkley's cycle shop in Cheltenham.

A year or two later the two got together again to perform *St. Luke's Passion*, which was the subject of James Cowley's thesis in his last year at St Paul's College; he had even done the translation of the text from German to English. It was thus that the new group, christened Philomusica of Gloucestershire



JAMES WALKLEY

(Philomusica meaning "lovers of music"), had their first practice on 10th October 1966 at St Michael's Church in Cheltenham and four months later, as one member chronicled, "The first performance was given in the Chapel of St Mary's and St Paul's College in Cheltenham on Sunday 5th February 1967 for members of the College and the public. This was followed by a performance on Saturday 25th February at St Mary's Wotton-under-Edge"; this was the performance which S. A. Smith attended, and where Philo, as members commonly abbreviate the name, also earned its first press notices. There were that night about 28 singers, and at each subsequent performance of the piece. In the press notice, which appeared in *The Citizen* on Friday March 10th 1967, it was stated that James Walkley already had plans for

eight groups spread over Gloucestershire. *St Luke's Passion* was performed again on 2nd March, 1967, at St. Michael's Church, Whaddon Road. On the 14th November the second local group, at Stroud, had its first rehearsal at St Alban's Church Hall.

Jim Walkley noted that the orchestral expenses for the third performance, at St Michael's Whaddon Road, were £8. Orchestral players were taken from a total pool of 22 good amateur performers, and the leader was a well-known local violinist, Marjorie

Lenoir. Another conductor was also recruited, Mr Clive Frost, who was director of music at Cleeve School, and whom they had presumably come to know during their early days with Cleeve Choral Society.

On a very early programme, probably from one of the first five performances of Philomusica, James Walkley was described as the “Founder and Artistic Director” and also “Consort of Solo Voices – Vocal Coach”. Soloists were chosen from this group. James Cowley and Clive Frost were named as the Conductors. Later on James Cowley took over this role alone.

In the winter of 1967/68, Philomusica sang Berlioz’s *Childhood of Christ* in various venues. The secretary wrote: “On December 8th and 9th heavy snow fall, 24 members turned up at Bishops Cleeve at 3.30pm, it was decided to cancel performance as conditions so bad. Sang through complete performance for self-enjoyment, then had excellent tea at the rectory.”

The jolly social life Philomusica has always enjoyed was evident very early on. The first “social” was held at St Peter’s Hall, Cheltenham, 19th April 1969; “this proved very successful with 62 members attending.” That there were 62 members who actually came would seem to indicate that the first three years of its existence had seen a three-fold increase in numbers.



James Cowley

In 1969 a Carol Concert was held at Stroud Subscription Rooms. This was to begin thirty years of a happy association, which only ended in 1998. The admission price to this concert was 2/6d, programmes cost 1/- and the profit at the end was a grand total of 5/6d. An early chronicler of Philomusica wrote, “In 1969 Philomusica gave the first of its annual Carol Concerts with children from the Rosary School. In 1975 children from Callowell also took part and this concert has now become a regular part of the calendar. This year there are problems created by the reduced capacity of the Subscription Rooms but it is hoped that this can be resolved somehow.” In fact it did end, after the concert on 1st December 1998, when the audience just got too big for the venue. The long connection Philomusica had with these two junior schools was due to James Cowley being a teacher first at the Rosary School and then at Callowell. He later became deputy head of Callowell. A commitment to including young singers in our Christmas concerts still continues today, with “Philominor” still joining in with our festive singing.

As James Walkley had always stated as his aim, further “groups” of Philomusica singers continued to spring up. The Winchcombe Group began in September 1968, and “On 12th September 1969 there was held the Inaugural Meeting of the Gloucester Group, in ‘the hut, St Michael’s Square, opposite the Technical College’”. The Winchcombe Group appears to have amalgamated very soon with the group which began just outside the county, at Evesham. A fifth group was founded in Cirencester by Rev. S. R. Stephenson 1st January 1970. The conductor of this group was Mr Malcolm

(Jack) Capener, a gifted musician who was to have a long and happy relationship with Philomusica.

Although there was apparently no formal administrative organisation of Philomusica in the beginning, Rev. S. R. Stevens, vicar of St. Lawrence, Bussage, near Stroud, was the president of Philomusica from almost the start. His spiritual life is reflected in his involvement with Philomusica, which was conscientious and sincere – programmes for concerts given during his presidency always contained a very uplifting Christian message in his presidential address.

Recently a lovely article appeared in *Soundbites*, the magazine of the choir, recalling the very early days of being in the “rank and file” of Philomusica. It was written by Miss Iris Trask, of Stroud; Iris is the longest serving member and has given great service to Philomusica, including much solo work. She was recently granted Honorary Life Membership by the AGM “by acclaim”. She recalls that Philomusica often performed in “very cold country churches in remote parts of Gloucestershire” and that “In the early years we sang somewhere almost every weekend”. This was all too true – there were about thirty concerts per year in those days, including the once-traditional short version of *Messiah* on Boxing Day in Tetbury Parish Church, where “Malcolm Capener usually conducted and Jim Cowley played the organ”. There were also performances on New Year’s Day, although the secretary recalled that “The very late concert of 1970, planned for Tetbury on Boxing Day, had to be cancelled due to heavy snow fall.” Iris also remembers the poor attendance they sometimes got; she recalls “‘Singing to empty seats’ and ‘Poor turn out for glorious music’, [were] headings in two newspaper reports from 1971 and 1972. Nothing changes! ... but I always remember (and often repeat) Jim Walkley’s words: ‘Just regard it as a dress rehearsal.’” The lack of facilities for the choir also left a deep impression. The scarcity of toilets was a perennial problem, although it was partly alleviated when people would “leave their side door open”; if you were *in extremis* “in those days there were some good hedgerows!” All too often the instructions for the day would include “TF” (take food) or even “TF&D” (take food and drink), at which Iris recalls they all “felt a bit cheated”. However, they were “expected to turn up every week ... because of our small numbers”. And they did.

Part 2 – The Seventies

James Walkley's intention to create eight regional groups continued to make progress. In the early seventies there were five groups in existence: Gloucester, Cheltenham, Stroud, Cirencester and the Forest of Dean, based at Coleford. The Evesham/Winchcombe group appears to have amalgamated with the Cheltenham



group. Each group was theoretically limited to thirty-two singers, which would have meant 160 singers, if they had all turned up for a concert! The total membership was actually just over 100 in September 1971 at Philomusica's 5th birthday, much the same number at it is today. On 2nd January 1972 it was reported that Philomusica now had seven active groups –

unfortunately in that programme these were not named.

Philomusica has in recent years had many successful choral trips abroad (of which more later) but in the early days that was not the case. Although it was mooted several times that Philomusica should branch out, James Walkley discouraged it: he was quoted as saying "Because it hasn't that vast a repertoire [Philomusica] has turned down offers to go abroad – namely France. We stay in the county because we are a county philomusica [sic]."

Around this time came another big step towards the Philomusica we know today. In 1973 Philomusica of Worcestershire was formed, with Geoffrey Stanley, the head of the music department on the Worcester College of Education, as conductor. Concert programmes from the period show that there was a collaboration between the two county groups from the beginning, each one gave its own concerts but they did use each other's organists, conductors, choristers and soloists if needed. The *Citizen* reported, for example, that on April 22nd 1976 "The Philomusica of Gloucestershire ... joined with its counterpart from Worcestershire" to present a concert in Gloucester Cathedral conducted by James Cowley and Jack Capener. Gradually the collaborations became more intimate, with the longer-established and presumably larger Gloucestershire Philomusica perhaps increasingly at the forefront.

We reached a milestone when our 100th concert was given on April 18th, 1972, at Gloucester Cathedral – in fact it was actually two concerts on the same day. The pieces included the *St Nicholas Mass* by Haydn, the *Serenade to Music* by Ralph Vaughan Williams and the *Alto Rhapsody* by Brahms.

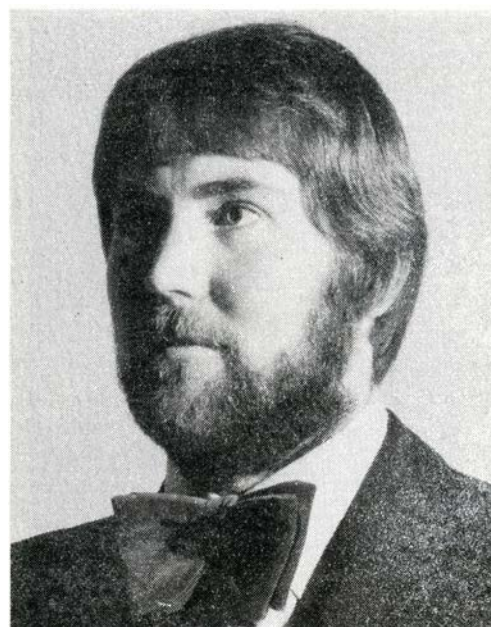
The repertoire of Philomusica is something we have not really looked at yet. The composed with which we are most closely associated is of course Edward Elgar. As far as I can tell from the archives, the first work we performed by Elgar was in the 134th Philomusica concert. This was on 7th April 1973 in Gloucester Cathedral and was the Prelude to *The Dream of Gerontius*. The conductor was James Cowley, and the work was performed with an organ accompaniment. On 12th May 1973 we performed for the first time the entire *Dream of Gerontius*, at St. Andrew's Church, Churchdown, again conducted by James Cowley but this time accompanied by the orchestra.

Over the years Philomusica has organised and performed in five Elgar Festivals. One such was Tewkesbury Elgar Festival 21st May to 4th June 1978. In the programme the President of Philomusica was still Rev S. R. Stevens, vicar of Bussage, but several prominent new members had joined us by then – these two soloists you may well recognise.



Linda Parsons

David Parsons



The social side of Philomusica was flourishing too. The secretary recorded that “On Friday 22nd January [1971] Philo held its first Dinner at the Royal George Hotel, Birdlip. Ninety-two members and friends were present, a good meal, and entertainment provided by members. The highlight of the evening was Jim Cowley accepting a challenge to sing the National Anthem while standing on his head ...” I understand he successfully completed the challenge. “On 23rd February 1972 the Society held its second annual Dinner at New County Hotel in Gloucester.”

As Philomusica became more widely known and appreciated, they were asked to participate in more events. For example, they were asked to participate in the celebrations of Ralph Vaughan Williams's Centenary in October 1972, but that raised a knotty problem. They were due to perform RVW's *Dona Nobis Pacem*, with orchestra, but at one crucial point the percussion section needed a huge gong, which they didn't have and couldn't source. Eventually, Philomusica put an advert in the *Citizen* begging for the loan of “a large gong, preferably at least two feet wide” to use for this one vital

note. They promptly were offered one from Harewood Junior School, Tuffley, and the performance went ahead.

The performances were gradually accumulating too. It was recorded that “We celebrated our 200th performance in Tewkesbury Abbey on 20th April 1975 with a performance of *The Dream of Gerontius*.” Unfortunately we do not have a programme for that concert, so we do not know for certain who sang Gerontius, but when Philomusica sang the oratorio again at the Tewkesbury Elgar Festival in 1978 the chief soloist was John Crayford. Formerly a professional tenor, John performed some outstanding roles with the choir over the years, and is still in touch. The 250th Concert – was on 7th December 1976, at Stroud Subscription Rooms, was the traditional Christmas Carol Concert.



JOHN CRAYFORD, Tenor.

There were other notable concerts around this time. On Tuesday 7th Jan 1977 Philomusica recorded an edition of “*Sunday Half Hour*” in Tetbury Parish Church, introduced by Jeremy Carrad. It was broadcast on the Radio 2 on 9th January 1977. On 31st May 1977 the 264th concert was a Gala Jubilee Concert to celebrate the Queen’s Silver Jubilee. It took place at Cheltenham Town Hall and was in aid of the Cotswold Cheshire Home and Drapers Cottage Homes. The guest soloist was Dame Isobel Baillie. Dame Isobel also featured in the 1978 Tewkesbury Elgar Festival in 1978 and the Hereford Elgar Festival in 1980, and remained a supporter of Philomusica. Also taking part was the treble Craig Jackson – I wonder where he is now? One of the most spectacular concerts Philomusica gave at this time was also given as part of the Tewkesbury Elgar Festival. James Cowley conducted the choir in both *The Apostles* and *The Kingdom* on the same day in Tewkesbury Abbey. As far as I can ascertain, this was the first time this feat, which was what Elgar originally wanted to happen, was accomplished.

Happily, somebody took the trouble to write down the concerts performed in the summer of 1973. All the performances were of *The Dream of Gerontius*, and I reproduce the list here to give you an idea of the work involved, and the distances travelled, by Philomusica members (my bold type).

1. St Andrew’s **Churchdown**, on **12th of May**, where Jim Cowley took over as Conductor at one day’s notice, because Brian Thomas was ill.
2. St John’s **Coleford** on **19th of May**.
3. All Saints Uplands **Stroud** on **9th of June**.
4. **Malmesbury Abbey** on **16th of June**.
5. **Evesham** Methodist Church on **30th of June** with Evesham and District Choral Society.
6. **Chippenham** Parish Church on **7th of July**.

Part 3 - The Eighties

On 14th July 1980, the Rev S. R. Stephens wrote a letter tendering his resignation as president of Philomusica, giving as his reason that he was unable to give it as much time as he felt it deserved. On 28th August, therefore, Mr Kenneth Heppell, a notable bass in the choir, was confirmed as the new President. He remained President throughout a considerable reorganisation of the society (which will be explained below) until his sudden death in 1988. The choir was very fortunate to choose as his successor Sally, Duchess of Westminster, who was already an enthusiastic supporter of Philomusica. Her forwards to subsequent programmes were a breath of fresh air. Unfortunately they were over too soon, because at the performance of *The Dream of Gerontius* at Gloucester Cathedral on 30th May 1990, with great regret, her death was announced. She was succeeded in turn by John Miller MBE, who had been President of the Gloucestershire Elgar Festival in September 1984 and had been Chief Executive to Gloucester County Council.

The 350th concert was held on May 31st, 1980. On September 24th 1982, in Gloucester Cathedral, the choir again sang *The Dream of Gerontius*. The part of Gerontius was sung this time by the internationally acclaimed singer and teacher John Mitchinson. Not only was this a memorable performance, but it began a friendship which has continued to this day. The choir, interestingly, was still billed as Philomusica of Gloucestershire and the cast also included James Walkley, Diana Walkely and Edward Chetcuti, the organist was Neil Fortin and the conductor was James Cowley.

In the eighties there continued to be more innovative and memorable performances. On October 15th, 1983, the choir performed the little-known cantata by Elgar *King Olaf*, at Thornbury Parish Church. A ticket to the performance would have cost you 20p. At this time we are told that the annual subscription to Philomusica was £12. Philomusica has in fact performed all Elgar's choral works over the years except *The Black Knight*, and that omission is to be rectified within the next couple of years. *The Dream of Gerontius* (or substantial sections of it) we have in fact performed 40 times; *Music Makers* 32, *Spirit of England* 24, *The Apostles* 24, *The Kingdom* 22, *Light of Life/Lux Christi* 23, not to mention dozens of songs and orchestral pieces – and that's just one composer.

By the time of the 400th concert on 20th June 1982 the administrative part of Philomusica was on a much more organised basis. The President, as we have just recorded, was Kenneth Heppell, Chairman Roy Hunter and vice-chairman Dennis Lyes. "Chairman" would seem to imply that there was a committee structure in place, but I have no minutes of meetings for this early date. Roy Hunter sang tenor with Philomusica and was a fine musician in his own right. Dennis Lyes contributed for many years as a stalwart bass. He retired a few years ago but is often to be seen at our concerts, as churchwarden of Holy Trinity Church in Longford, Gloucester. Roy Hunter actually retired as Chairman shortly after this list was published, and was succeeded by Dennis Lyes. James Walkley was Hon Secretary, Hon Treasurer Marie Wells, Hon Secretary of the Friends of Philomusica Mrs Anita Morris, Chorus Librarian Mrs Sylvia Strange, Orchestra Librarian Mrs Val Willard, NFMS Representative Michael McCurragh. The

huge repertoire Philomusica was accruing can be implied by the two librarians the society now needed. The forming of “Friends of Philomusica” also deserves a mention. This group provided details of upcoming concerts to anyone who voiced an interest, for a small charge. The running of it was later taken over by Rachel Hemmings. Another interesting addition was the National Federation of Music Societies representative. Membership of this group was apparently needed in order for the choir to apply for a grant (the details of which are, alas, forgotten) but it did give the choir information and support from similar societies around the country. The archives of Making Music, NFMS’s successor, were unfortunately unable to say exactly when we joined. However, the Hon Sec and Treasurer of Philomusica of Worcestershire, Miss Margaret Probett, is also mentioned, implying that the Worcester group were autonomous, although under the same president and chairman.

The parallel running of the two groups can be seen working at the 400th concert, which was held at the Stroud Subscription Rooms on June 20th, 1982. This was a very high-profile event, presented by the Roman Catholic Church, Beeches Green, Stroud, to raise money for a local Catholic hospice and attended by Princess Michael of Kent. The audience was 300 (which must have filled the Subscription Rooms to capacity), and Philomusica sang, amongst other things, Mendelssohn’s *Hymn of Praise* and Elgar’s *Coronation Ode*. The choir was billed as “Philomusica of Gloucestershire and Worcestershire” but was conducted by a “Principal Conductor” (James Cowley) and a “Philomusica of Worcestershire Conductor” (Nigel Edwards), so the two groups were not seen as fully integrated yet.

Some very memorable concerts are recorded early in the eighties. On 6th December 1981 (St Nicholas’s Day) James Cowley conducted the *St Nicholas Mass* in Tetbury Parish Church, before the Princes of Wales and Princess Diana. Other guests included the Lord Lieutenant, the Duke of Beaufort and Sir Peter Pears, and other works showed English music at its most beautiful, with music by Finzi, Sumsion, Britten, Elgar and Arnold Bax. On 9th December 1984 we sang the fifth of the series of big orchestral winter concerts in Tetbury, entitled “Music for Christmas”, which was attended by Sir Peter Pears, the world-famous tenor and co-founder, with Benjamin Britten, of the Aldeburgh Festival. Sally, Duchess of Westminster was also there. The Prince of Wales (as Duke of Cornwall) couldn’t go but “made a generous contribution”². The proceeds were donated to to Snape Maltings, and Philomusica also gave £2000 to St Mary’s Restoration Fund. The concert was sponsored by Heritage Shops. Sadly, the sixth concert, of 6th December 1982, was in memory of Sir Peter, who had died the previous April. It featured readings by Julia Lang, of *Listen with Mother* fame.

A significant milestone was reached on November 14th 1985 as Philomusica performed its 500th concert in Gloucester Cathedral. The choir was still performing a prodigious number of concerts. 1967 to 1985 is only eighteen years and that means they must have sung an average of nearly 28 per year, more than one a fortnight. Concerts could still be on awkward days too; there was still an annual performance of *St Matthew Passion* (a huge logistic effort, requiring an orchestra with two solo violins, a double SATB choir, soloists and a treble choir) on Palm Sunday at Stroud Parish Church. But the members

still turned up! In 1988 there was an official accolade when James Walkley was awarded an MBE for his services to music.

Kenneth Heppell, as we have noted, sadly died in 1988, and Sally, Duchess of Westminster, succeeded him as President of Philomusica. In the same report as the Duchess's appointment, it was also reported that Philomusica had already over past concerts raised over £45,000 for charity. Philomusica did not become a Registered Charity until the 1990's but from the very beginning we have always tried to help local and national charities at virtually all our concerts.

The 600th concert, on October 16th, 1988, featured a performance of *The Messiah*, of which there have been quite a few over the years. On 24th September 1989 James Cowley celebrated twenty years as director of music at Tetbury Parish Church by conducting the church choir in *The Coronation Mass* by Mozart, with orchestra, as part of the liturgy for morning communion. At 3pm he rounded off the day by conducting Philomusica in *The Messiah*.

In 1989, Philomusica eased up on concerts a little; they only did nineteen! Not that they were insignificant works. *The Dream of Gerontius*, *St Matthew Passion*, Dvořák *Te Deum*, Mozart *Solemn Vespers* were just some of the major works they performed. Philomusica performed six concerts in December alone, including one on New Year's Eve. However, Gloucester and Worcester Philomusica still had separate billing, as can be seen in the Great Witley concert programme for May 1986.

Part 4 - The Nineties

The eight area choirs that James Walkley originally had in mind were gradually coalescing to make the Cheltenham and Gloucester groups, Cheltenham finally joining Gloucester in 2000. However, the curious position of the Gloucestershire and Worcester groups running in tandem had yet to be resolved.

John Quinn joined Philomusica in spring 1987, having moved to Gloucestershire in December 1986. After three years singing tenor with the choir he felt it would be good to give something back, so at the 1990 AGM he stood for vice-chairman and was elected.

At the same AGM the committee was charged with revising and updating the constitution.

However, at the first committee he attended, in September 1990, the Chairman stood down in a disagreement with some part of this draft constitution, and the new vice chairman suddenly became the Chairman, “thrown in”, as he later remarked, “at the deep end”.



Valerie Tomalin, longtime accompanist,
and John Quinn, Chairman.

It was becoming clear that the Gloucester and Worcester groups were not as united as they should be, so one of the first things the committee decided was that the new constitution should formally change the name of the society to Philomusica of Gloucestershire and Worcestershire. The draft constitution was put to the 1991 AGM for adoption. After thorough discussion the document was approved. So the society was at last formally and happily unified.

As the years went by, people got a little older, and one or two sadly left us. In 1991 Les Williams passed on, a long-term member who was also on the committee for a number of years. In the same year Victor Newbury, who had sung with us since 1977, also died. In 1932 he had met Elgar himself at a meeting of the Glee Club, and the composer had signed Victor's copy of *Land of Hope and Glory*. A memorial service was held for him in Evesham, where he had been a chorister for many years, in which Philomusica took part. On a happier note, 1991 was also Philomusica's 25th anniversary, which was celebrated with a party at Oxstalls College.

In 1995 Philomusica celebrated its 750th anniversary with a concert aptly entitled *Hallelujah!* It was performed on 31st March at Gloucester Cathedral, and the proceeds went to the Pied Piper Appeal. The forward to the programme was written by Princess Diana.

At last Philomusica ventured outside Britain. In 1990, Philomusica was invited to participate in the 3-day Mozart Festival in the Grote Kirk in Naarden near Amsterdam in October 1990. We in turn welcomed the Vocal Ensemble Jack Loorj, from the Netherlands, to perform in the City of Gloucester Elgar Festival. A few years later, in May 1996, Philomusica visited Gloucester's twin town of Metz in France, as guests of



the Festival Musiques 1996 at Hagondage. The choir gave concerts jointly with our French hosts in Metz cathedral and at Hagondage. We also gave a concert ourselves – and were joined by our hosts for a couple of items - in the Arsenal Hall, which had magnificent acoustics and seated over 1000 people. The Union Philharmonique de Metz Sablon and the Chorale Clairfontaine from Hagondage returned the visit in July 1998, giving three concerts, including tremendous performances alongside Philomusica of Berlioz's *Te Deum* in Pershore Abbey and Gloucester Cathedral.

We have not yet mentioned our accompanists, who have supported our singing admirably over the years (and sometimes on dire pianos!) – their service should be celebrated as well as the singers. Amongst many, we must mention Valerie Tomalin, who gave us her musicianship

It's not all hard work !

and wise counsel for about twenty years starting in 1993, and until very recently sang alto with the choir, and our accompanist until July 2016, Simon Bertram, who, apart from his superb playing has stood in for the conductor at the occasional rehearsal, and is famous for his magnificent rendition of *Happy Birthday*. We salute them all.

A very high-profile concert took place on 25th October 1996. Herbert Sumsion, the English composer and long-serving Organist of Gloucester Cathedral who had taught James Cowley, had died the previous year, aged 96. In October 1976, Philomusica had premiered his setting in D at Evensong in Tewkesbury Abbey, conducted by Jack Capener. The 1996 concert was to raise money for the Herbert Sumsion Memorial Stained Glass Window in Gloucester Cathedral. The beautiful little window was finished in time for Sumsion's 100th anniversary; on June 27th, 1999, we gave a centenary concert in honour of Sumsion, at Cheltenham Ladies College; included were his own compositions *At Valley Green*, *Benedicite* and *A Mountain Tune*.

In 1998 Jim Cowley became ill, and although he gallantly worked on for a time he died in December that year. In the early years Philomusica had several conductors by Jim was the backbone of our conducting staff and over time he became the principal conductor. Jim was especially noted for his devotion to the music of Bach and that of English composers, especially Elgar. As well as his work with Philomusica Jim Cowley served as Director of Music at Tetbury Parish Church, holding that post for a few weeks short of thirty years. Philomusica owes Jim a huge debt: his passing was truly the end of an era.

Part 4 -The Naughties

Jim Cowley was an outstanding musician. On November 26th 2000, at Cheltenham Town Hall, Philomusica premiered an oratorio, *The Crown of Life*, which consisted of settings of religious poems by the English poet William Alabaster (1567 – 1640) set to music by Richard Knight; the work was dedicated to Jim's memory. A few weeks before the premiere Richard also accompanied us on our trip to Boston.

Jim Cowley's death created a problem for Philomusica's organisation. In the immediate aftermath of his death we had three conductors conducting the three groups (Worcester, Cheltenham and Gloucester), conducting concerts in turn. But when the choir was due to visit the USA in October 2000, two conductors declared themselves unavailable, and all the work fell on the third conductor Linda Parsons – who did it admirably. The general opinion of the committee was that the current system was unsatisfactory and that Philomusica should appoint a sole conductor, considering external candidates also. However, at this point the two other conductors suddenly resigned, and something had to be done swiftly to safeguard future performances. It gradually became evident that some members of the choir were uneasy with the committee's strategy and at the 2000 AGM rival candidates stood against every member of the existing committee but, with one exception, the existing committee was re-elected. Discontent, however, rumbled on, and in order to unite Philomusica again in November 2001 the committee called an EGM, seeking a vote of confidence in the committee. At this EGM, chaired by the President John Miller, the vote of confidence was passed. Some members opted to leave Philomusica after this, but the vast majority of Philomusica stayed, happily united under their new sole conductor Linda Parsons – as indeed they are to this day.

Since first performing as a Guest Soloist with Philomusica in 1982, John Mitchinson, widely known as 'Mitch', has maintained his friendship with the society, coming to concerts when he could, giving kindly but very helpful and insightful reviews -



John Mitchinson, President of Philomusica

I remember him chiding us gently for our “democratic pitch” on one occasion! - giving coaching to some of our soloists and of course singing *Gerontius* with us, and in 1996 his kindness was recognised when the AGM elected him Vice-President.


Philomusica

Tewkesbury Abbey
Saturday November 25th 7.30 p.m.
Sir Edward Elgar
The Dream of Gerontius



Image by Daniel Marsula used with the kind permission of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Conductor: Linda Parsons
Soloists: John Mitchinson, Karen Longmate, David Parsons
The Royal Welsh College of Music & Drama Orchestra
The Dean Close School Chamber Choir & The Philomusica Chorus

Tickets £12.00 (Concessions £11.00) can be obtained from:
The Abbey Store; John Quinn 01452 506417 or on the door
Accompanied Children under 14 free of charge

Philomusica of Gloucestershire & Worcestershire Registered Charity 1032335
www.philomusica.org.uk



An example of Philomusica's distinctive posters, designed by David Parsons and printed by Phil Josephs.

On 25th November 2006, Mitch gave what he declared to be his last ever performance of *Gerontius* with Philomusica at Tewkesbury Abbey – a magnificent, spine-chilling performance to a packed audience. Karen Longmate as the Angel, and David Parsons as the Priest, also gave outstanding performances. We were accompanied on that

occasion by the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama Orchestra and the Dean Close School Chamber Choir also took part. This concert brought together three institutions closely identified with Mitch. As well as his association the Philomusica he had been for many years the Head of Vocal Studies at the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama and latterly was a highly valued teacher of singing at Dean Close.

In 2005, on the retirement of our President John Miller, Mitch was unanimously elected our new President. On March 31st 2012 we laid on an eightieth birthday party for him at Dean Close School, with the delicious spread organised, as so many times before and since, by our indefatigable treasurer Sue Bingham, and a sumptuous birthday cake made by Gaye Boggon. It was a joyful evening, full of Mitch's recordings and his wonderful stories of a long life in music. It also featured music and tales from John's wife Maureen Guy, an internationally famous singer and a wonderful teacher in her own right, and a long-time supporter of Philomusica. Sadly, Mrs Mitchinson died shortly before the 2015 AGM, when she and Mitch were to be made Honorary Life Members of the Society.

We must also here record the passing of James Walkley MBE on February 24th 2008, aged 85.

Further Adventures Abroad.

In 2000 Philomusica went travelling again, to Boston, Massachusetts. From there, as well as trips out (the highlights of which, for me, were whale-watching and seeing the re-creation of Plymouth at the time of the Pilgrim Fathers) we performed two concerts; one, fittingly, in Gloucester and one in Worcester. At the church where we sang in Gloucester the congregation gave us a memorable supper afterwards. They also presented us with Mr Lobsterman, a talisman we carry to this day. In Easter week 2006, we started our 40th year with a trip to Bruges in Belgium, where we gave two concerts. The first was in Aalst, where we played to a full house and where we were treated to a wonderful party afterwards – including Belgian beer - and were given souvenir pens. The second was in the Church of St Mary in Bruges. This was an afternoon free concert, and when we began to sing there was not much of an audience. Gradually, however, more and more people came in, and stayed, and at the end they gave us a standing ovation.



Mr. Lobsterman.

In 2009 we went to Rouen. The first concert was in the beautiful little country church of St Denis in Lyons-la-Forêt where we gave a concert, entitled *With a Voice of Singing*, of English 19th and 20th-century music to a capacity audience. The second was given in the beautiful ultra-modern Church of Jeanne d'Arc in Rouen.



Jeanne d'Arc Church, Rouen.

Part 5 - The Present and the Future.



Linda Parson rehearsing with the choir in Oudenbosch - the soloist is David Parsons.

Most recently, in 2013, we visited Antwerp. We gave two concerts called *Feel the Spirit*, the title of the cycle of spirituals by John Rutter which formed the climax of the programme. The first concert was given in the sombre magnificence of Sint Pauluskirk, in the city itself (which took some finding by the bus driver, who went round it three times first!) For the second, we took a bus trip into neighbouring Holland, where we performed in the brilliant surroundings of Basiliek H. H. Agatha en Barbara in Oudenbosch – a two-thirds scale replica of St Peter's in Rome. As yet we don't know where we are going for our next trip, but all our visits so far have shown how a love of music can unite people across national and cultural barriers.

Philomusica has definitely moved with the times. We now have our own website, via which information is efficiently distributed, which was set up and is peerlessly maintained by David Parsons. Email has meant that the committee can share information much quicker. We have increased our income, and yet kept our subscription to a very low level in comparison to other similar societies, not only by Gift Aid and the putting together of orchestras with Yorkshire prudence by long-time soloist and committee member Karen Longmate, but by all sorts of small but ingenious ways. The Small Change tins, for example, bring in regular contributions, and various sales of

garden produce, clothes, books, tapes, and CD's have all swelled the coffers. The largest contributors have probably been the Supper Concerts, an annual series of concerts (with a delicious supper included) given currently at the Abbey House in Tewkesbury. These are organised by Linda and David Parsons, and provide an amazing variety of music performed by a wide range of musicians, including Philomusica members and rising stars from Dean Close School. Another source of income is the Songbards, consisting of Linda Parsons, David Parsons, Kathryn Skipp and John Quinn, with their accompanist Mair Shankster, who give concerts of word and music around the region – with due deference to Flanders and Swann!

In the meantime, our social life is flourishing still. We have tried our hand at bowls in Gloucester, thanks to Derek Taylor, enjoyed an evening of live jazz on the water at Evesham organised by Annie Norris, an afternoon of croquet and Elizabethan madrigals in Jeremy Lenox's lovely garden – the madrigals having been arranged by the wonderfully skilled, and much missed, David Charlesworth. There has also been a Pork Roast event organised by the Checketts and most recently a murder and mystery night devised by Sam Thomas. We have also taken to having a tasty supper together at the Talbot in Kempsey after our final Christmas concert each year, organised by Lyn Rimell. In 2017 we have the Wye Challenge to look forward to: this is the brainchild of Tim Jeffree and Kathryn Skipp, who plan to navigate the River Wye in a canoe built by Tim. This watery challenge will be in aid of Philomusica and Maggie's, a cancer care charity in Cheltenham. Philomusica's taste for fun, and the inventive skills of our members, are apparently inexhaustible.

2016 is a memorable year. We gave our 1000th concert in April and our 50th anniversary concert will take place in November. In the 1000th concert we sang the music of Elgar – naturally – with *The Music Makers* and the Prologue to *The Apostles*. We also performed *The Lord is my Shepherd* by John Rutter and finished with his *Feel the Spirit*, one of our favourite works and a suitable rousing finale. During the concert the Elgar Society presented Philomusica with the Certificate of Merit, recognising our performances of Elgar's work over the years. The 50th Anniversary Concert will be a Pageant of British Music, including works by Bob Chilcott, Elgar, Parry, Stanford, Vaughan Williams and Ian Venables.

There are many concerts I have not had time to mention, many loyal singers and talented soloists and valiant workers-behind-the-scenes I have not recorded, many friendships created and acts of quiet kindness that I have had to miss out. I hope, however, that I have conveyed the flavour at least of what a joy it has been for so many of us to belong to and to sing with Philomusica, and that you will forgive the omissions.

I must finally return to the envoy of S. A. Smith's letter to the *Gloucester Citizen*. It was: "Thank you ... for two hours sheer enjoyment. May you and your Philomusica friends sing for ever."

Thank you, Mr Smith. I hope so too.

NOTES.

- (1) Letter to *The Citizen*, Friday, March 10th, 1967. (“Gloucester Day by Day”).
- (2) *The Citizen*, Tuesday, December 11th, 1984.

My grateful thanks to Miss Iris Trask for allowing me to quote her article in *Soundbites*.