



ROCHESTER CATHEDRAL OLD CHORISTERS' ASSOCIATION

HISTORY OF THE CHOIR OF ROCHESTER CATHEDRAL

James Strike: editor.
Chorister 1950-52.
ROCOA Archivist.

604

Rochester Cathedral was founded in 604 when Archbishop Augustus ordained Justus as Bishop of Rochester. This first church was a simple stone building, the outline of which can be seen marked out on the paving at the west end of the present Cathedral.

The earliest record of singing in the Cathedral is attributed to The Venerable Bede; monk, scholar and historian, who cites, in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation, Book IV* :

'When Archbishop Theodore of Tarsus arrived in England in 664, sacred music was only known in Kent. And when Putta was consecrated Bishop of Rochester in 669, he was extraordinarily skilful in the Roman style of music which he had learned from the disciples of the Holy Pope Gregory'.
Rev. R. Johnstone, Rochester Cathedral Choir School. p.2.

1077

In 1077, Gundulf became Bishop of Rochester in 1077. He was a skilful builder, being favoured by the king, William I, for the construction of the

White Tower at the Tower of London. During his thirty years as Bishop of Rochester he re-built the Cathedral and built the great Gundulf Tower by the North Transept. (*used now for the Choir Practice Room and Music Library*) Palmer, *The Cathedral Church of Rochester*, p.121.

1082

In 1082 Bishop Gundulf founded the Benedictine Priory dedicated to St Andrew. At his death there were sixty monks.

A.F. Leach, Medieval Schools.

There seems little doubt that the Monks of the Priory had 'Song-boys' or 'Cloister-boys'.

Rev. R. Johnstone, Rochester Cathedral Choir School. p.2.

1185

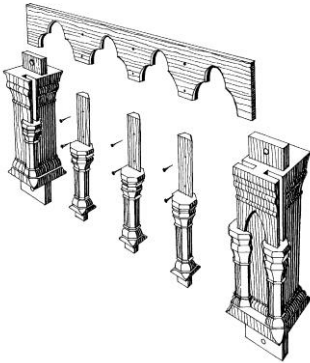
Cathedral Records refer to the presentation of an organ at Rochester as early as 1185. During the following five hundred years there are various references to the maintenance and repair of the organ.

A Short Account of the Organs of the Cathedral in Programme of Five Organ Recitals, May, 1957.

13th Century

The choir stalls at Rochester date back to the early thirteenth century. Regrettably, these rare medieval examples have been altered over the centuries and there is now little of the original to be seen. However, the trefoil-headed form work of the early timbers is still visible beneath the Lay Clerks seats.

*Charles Tracy. Drawings and Carpentry Notes, Cecil Hewett.
From: Friends of Rochester Cathedral Report for 1994/5 . p.19.*



1540

Henry VIII dissolved the Priory Church of St. Andrew in 1540.

1542

However, in 1542, Henry set up a 'New Foundation' for the Cathedral.

The 'New Foundation' was incorporated under the title 'Dean and Chapter of the Cathedral Church of Christ and the Blessed Virgin Mary'. Provision was made for a Master of the Choristers, six Lay Clerks, and eight Choristers. The New Foundation also made provision for a new Cathedral Grammar School; now known as The King's School.

G. H. Palmer, The Cathedral Church of Rochester, p.19.

The Cathedral Choristers did not attend the newly formed King's School but were trained and educated separately within the Cathedral Precincts under supervision of the Precentor and Master of the Choir. Arrangements for their education depended on the Clergy which were available to undertake the teaching, and the places, within the precincts available as teaching and for singing rooms.

1543

The Dissolution the English Monasteries and Priors forced a change to the form of service. The clergy had to give up the 'Use of Benedict' Order of Service and change to the 'Use of Sarum' Liturgy. This change required the choirs to learn new settings for the music at the new services. In 1543, Nicholas Heath, Bishop of Rochester, made substantial demands on the choristers: 'They were to sing a Lady Mass with polyphony every day of the year, on Principal Feasts they were to sing the whole gamut of High Mass, and after Compline, a prycksong anthem'.
(*pricking - writing music by hand*).

Alan Mould, The English Chorister, p.83.

also:

... 'the choir at Rochester (barely half the size of that at Canterbury) sang polyphony for evening votive antiphone and on most days at Lady Mass also, the latter being amplified with subordinate organ polyphony. Only on the principal, major double and Marain feasts was Lady Mass merely said, doubtless because on such days an elaborate setting was used for High Mass at the altar. The organ contributed polyphony to Matins, High Mass and Vespers on all feasts of nine lessons and above'.

Patrick Collinson et al, A History of Canterbury Cathedral, p. 428.

And W. H. Frere, The Use of Sarum, vol ii, p.235.

1635

In 1635, an otherwise unknown Lieutenant Hammond, undertook a tour of the cathedrals of England to write a critical description of the architecture, then the organ, and then to comment on the choir. For Rochester, he wrote "Her Quiristers, though but few, yet orderly and decent".

Alan Mould, The English Chorister, p.107.

1661

Details of the burial of a German Prince at Rochester in 1661, records:

'The body was met by the choir who sung the Te Deum and Nunc Dimittis.'

G.H. Palmer, The Cathedral Church of Rochester, p.27.

1735

The Organist's House, 7 Minor Canon Row.

(Numbers 1 to 6 were built in 1723; number 7 added in 1735)



1791

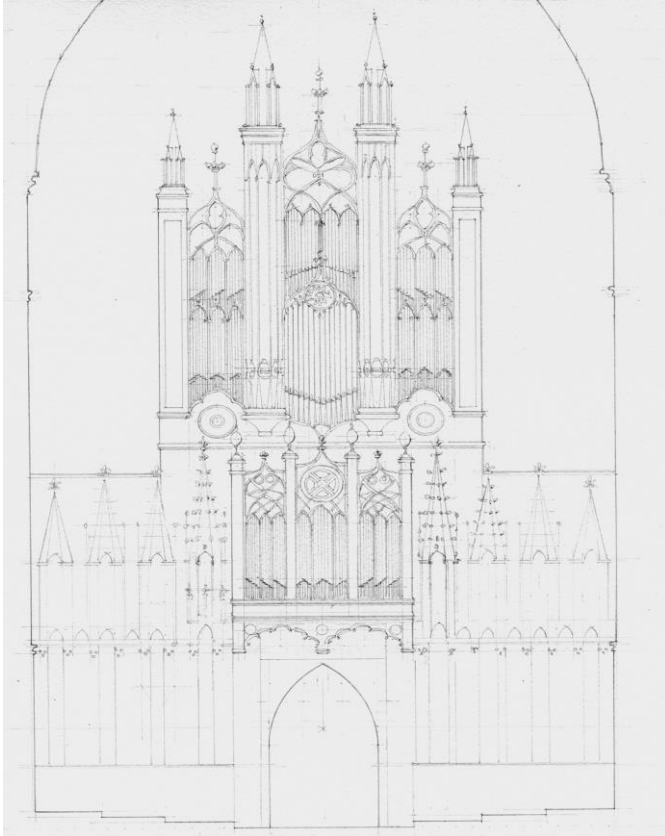
When Ralph Banks moved from Durham Cathedral to be organist at Rochester, he found the organ in a terrible state and, that for the past twelve years, a mere seven anthems had been sung for the Sunday repertoire, while the morning and evening canticles had been Aldrich in G and Rogers in D, sung on alternate weekends.

Alan Mould, The English Chorister, p.148.

Ralph Banks demanded a new organ for the Cathedral and was responsible for building the Samuel Green Organ. The organ case was designed by Rev. Ollive, Rector of Grays, Thurrock, who had previously designed the case for the Samuel Green organ at Canterbury Cathedral.

Paul Hale, The Organs of Rochester Cathedral. p.13.

*Drawing of the Samuel Green Organ,
James Strike, based on early photographs.*



The organ case appears to have been an impressive, albeit unscholarly, collection of Gothic style details.

An early photograph of the Quire in the early nineteenth century looking towards the Samuel Green Organ. It shows the timber carved hoods over the Dean and Canons' stalls, but predates the red 'lion' painted wall tiles and the gas chandeliers.

Photograph by kind permission of Paul Hale.



A tinted drawing of the Quire, looking East. This shows how the early choir-stalls continued eastwards across the transepts. The Choristers' stalls look rather sparse, albeit, the Lay Clerks seem to have cushions on their desk.

From the front cover, Friends of Rochester Cathedral Report, 1994/5.



1825

The small room over the fourteenth century Prior's Gate was, in 1825, used as part of the King's School. Shortly after this date it was used by the choristers of the Choir School.

G. H. Palmer, The Cathedral Church of Rochester, p.61.

Drawing of Prior's Gate by Edward De la Cour.



1843

In 1843 the number of choristers was increased from eight to twelve.

1845

From 1845, the Choir School made use of the front room of a house facing across the street to Minor Canon Row. The old timber framed house was owned by the Chapter and used as the residence for William Makepiece, Headmaster of the Choir School.

Alan Mould, The English Chorister, p.239.

Drawing, BBC Kent, Local History, 10 July 2009.



1851

It is recorded that the room over Prior's Gate was unoccupied in 1851 as it was offered for use by Mr. Meeres; the man selected by the Chapter to, hopefully, but unsuccessfully, remove Revd. Robert Whiston as Headmaster of the King's School.

Ralph Arnold, The Whiston Matter, p.110.

1853

The Revd. Griffith, Precentor in 1853, was a great supporter of the music at the Cathedral. A considerable number of bound volumes of church music were presented by him to the Choir Library.

Thanks to him, Rochester was among the first to introduce Wesley's Volume of 'Cathedral Anthems'.

Paul Hale, The Organs of Rochester Cathedral. p.17.

1870

Revd. Robert Scott was appointed Dean in 1870, a renowned Greek Scholar and Master of Balliol College, Oxford. He had strong Tractarian ideas and commissioned the architect Sir George Gilbert Scott, known for his ardent use of plain early gothic, to submit plans to remodel the Cathedral.

Gilbert Scott's re-ordering of the cathedral included new stalls in the quire, and restoration of the painted lions and fleurs-de-lis on the walls above the stalls,

1875

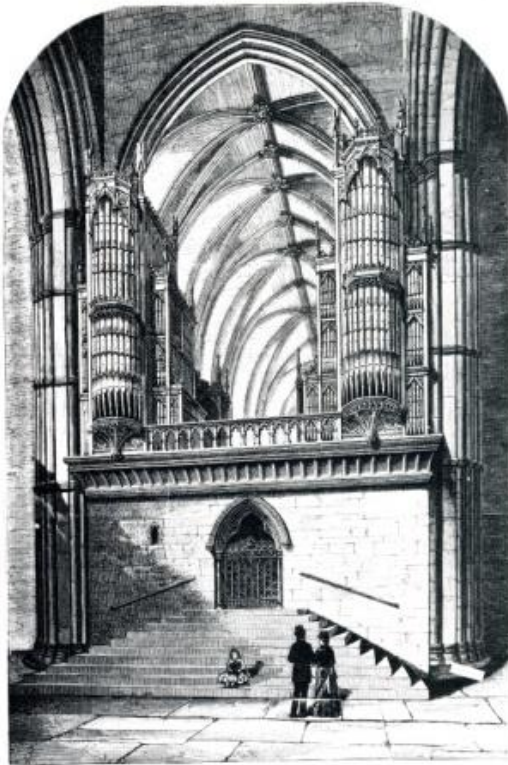
Gilbert Scott's re-ordering of the Cathedral also included his design for a new large double Organ Case, split to each end of the choir screen to allow an unbroken view of the roof line through the cathedral. The new organ of 1875 was built by J. W. Walker and Sons. The pipework, which included

some pipework from the earlier Samuel Green instrument, was squeezed with difficulty into the new divided organ case.
This drawing also shows the plain walls of the choir screen prior to the Dean Scott memorial statues of 1888.

Paul Hale, The Organs of Rochester Cathedral, p.18.

G. H. Palmer, The Cathedral Church of Rochester, p.91.

Drawing, Kent Archive Office.



1880

The oak choir stalls were added to the nave.

G. H. Palmer, The Cathedral Church of Rochester, p.35.



1882

The earliest known photograph of the Choristers, taken in 1882.

RCOCA archive.



1887

During the nineteenth century there was strong social pressure and political action to improve the education of children. As part of this movement, a new purpose built school was constructed by the Cathedral Chapter for the Choristers. The new Choir School was opened in 1887. The new building, which replaced the earlier house used by the choir school, was built over the south cloister range Frater Subvault of the old monastery.

The building is now named Garth House.

Photograph, James Strike.



Headmasters of the Choir School were:

1845-1887	William Makepiece <i>Chorister, St Paul's Cathedral Lay Clerk.</i>
1887-1895	Percy William Talbot
1895-1907	Rev. Edward Jackson Nash <i>Minor Canon.</i>
1907-1909	Rev. Hamilton Smyth Cobb <i>Minor Canon.</i>
1909-1913	Rev. Oscar Hardman <i>Minor Canon.</i>

- 1913-1918 Rev. William Edgar Morgan
 Minor Canon.
 Joined the Army as a Chaplain during the First
 World War
- 1915-1916 Rev. George Barrington-Baker
 (Acting Headmaster while Morgan was away
 on Military Service)
 Minor Canon.
- 1918-1919 Rev. Fred Harrison
 Minor Canon.
- 1919-1937 Rev. Rupert Johnstone
 Minor Canon.

1890

In 1890 Eton Suits were introduced with mortar-boards with red tassels.
 The Choir School Colours were red and black
This gives an origin for the present day RCOCA tie.

1905

The Cathedral Organ was rebuilt by J. W. Walker and Sons.

1906

The choristers with Bertram Luard-Selby.



1909

Rochester Cathedral Old Choristers' Association, ROCA, was formed in 1909 by the Organist, Bertram Laud-Selby. It is one of the oldest 'Old Choristers' Associations in the country.

Meeting of Rochester and Canterbury Old Choristers, at Canterbury.

STANDING from Left, 1.Harold Ring, 2.E.S. Forster, 3.4.G. Cook, 5.6. 7.A. Prior, 8.A.Scoones, 9.C. Hewitt, 10.11.12.R. Cooper, 13.Sid Ruck, 14.15.16.17. SEATED from left, 1.2.Bertram Luard-Selby, 3. The Dean of Canterbury, 4.

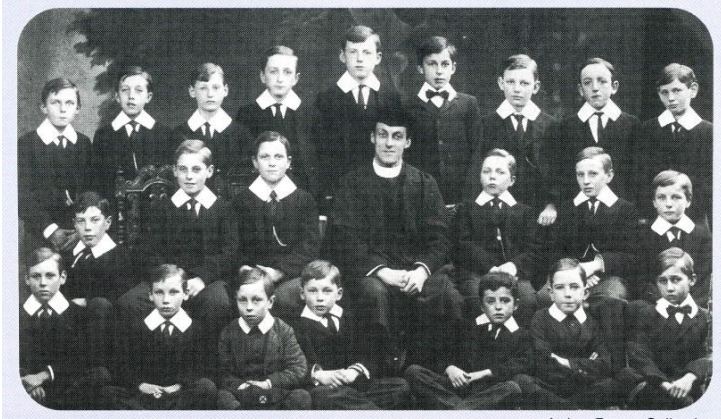


1910

Rochester, ROCA, was one of the founding members of the national 'Federation of Cathedral Old Choristers' Association' in 1910. The Federation Annual Festival was held at Rochester in 1914 and 1935.

1911

Boys of the Choir School in 1911,
Headmaster, Rev. Oscar Hardman.
Percy Whitlock, standing, third from left end.



Reminiscences of a chorister, Arthur Brown, 1911 to 1916:
'when the choir went to sing in Cobham church, at the wedding of the Earl of Darnley's daughter, we were taken in a wagonette drawn by two horses'
and:

'it was the custom to be 'initiated' into the choir: There were large cellars below the school, just above the monastic foundations; they were damp and unlit. New boys were told that a large dragon lived down there; the door was opened at the top of the stairs and sounds of roaring could be heard. Reluctantly, I went down into the pitch darkness, where I was seized and frightened by a group of older boys before setting me free'.

1914

The national 'Federation of Old Choristers' Associations' was held at Rochester in 1914.

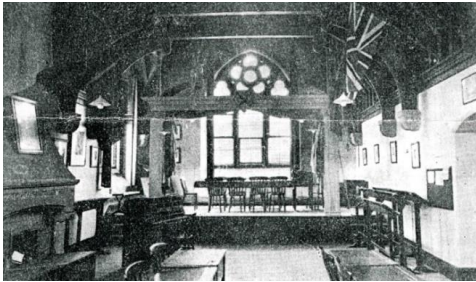
1916

Non-singing boys were introduced into the Choir School in 1916 to increase the size of the School.

1922

'Starting in a small way with an extract from 'Hamlet' in 1922, the School Play became an established event at the end of the Christmas Term with three performances given in the School Hall.'

Revd R. J. Johnstone, Rochester Cathedral Choir School, p.5.
The Choir School, School Hall.



1926

The Choir School, performance of 'As You Like It'
Shepherdess, Frank Smith; Clown, Jack Wright.



The earliest known recording of Rochester Cathedral Choir was made in 1926. Stanford, Magnificat in Bb, Master of the Choristers, Charles Hylton Stewart.

The well delivered, staccato performance gives a clear example of the rigid tempo and strict discipline preferred for the musical style of the period.

A 12 inch, 78 rpm shellac disc, released on the Columbia Label (Catalogue number 9165)

1927

Formal School photograph.



1929

The Oxford Psalter was first published in 1929. Charles Hylton-Stewart, Cathedral Organist at Rochester was one of its three editors, with “much valuable help” from Revd. R. Johnstone, Headmaster of the Choir School and P. W. Whitlock, chorister and Assistant Organist.

The Choir in 1929



1931
The Choir School in 1931.



1932

Choir School Sports Day, 1932, in front of the King's School Pavilion on the Paddock.



1934

The organ underwent a major overhaul.

1935

The national 'Federation of Old Choristers' Associations' was held at Rochester in 1935.

1937

In 1937 the Cathedral Choir Scholl was closed by the Dean and Chapter for reasons of economy. The boys were transferred to the King's School. Links between the Choir School and the King's School had grown close over the years. The boys of the Choir School were taught science at King's and there were annual cricket and rugby fixtures between them.

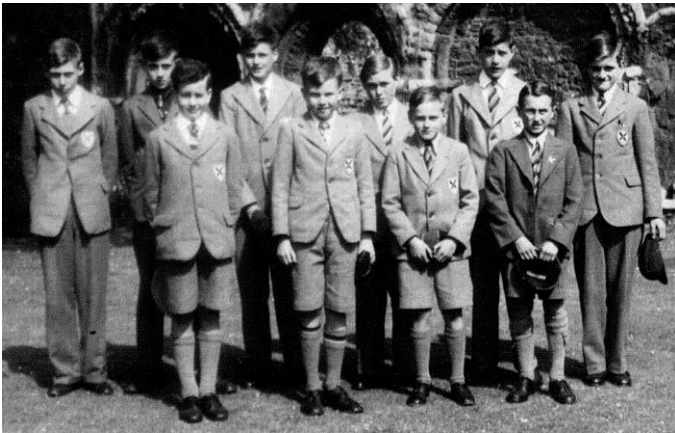
1939

Early in the Second World War King's School was evacuated, first to Lamberhurst, and then to King's College, Taunton. This included the Cathedral Choristers, so services were sung by the Ley Clerks.

1942

In the summer of 1942 it was deemed safe to re-open the Junior School at St Margaret's and full Choral Services were resumed in the Cathedral on 28th December, 1942.

Norman Horwood, John Clarke, Peter Lloyd, David Robinson, George Nelson, John Anderson, Christopher Henriques, Alan Blatchley, John Rye, Neville Palmer, and Ian Prince.



In 1942, the choristers went, in full robes to Shorts Brothers Sea Plane Factory on the banks of the River Medway to sing in the works canteen.

1944

One Sunday, just before the D-Day Landings, a service was broadcast from the Cathedral to Rochester in America.

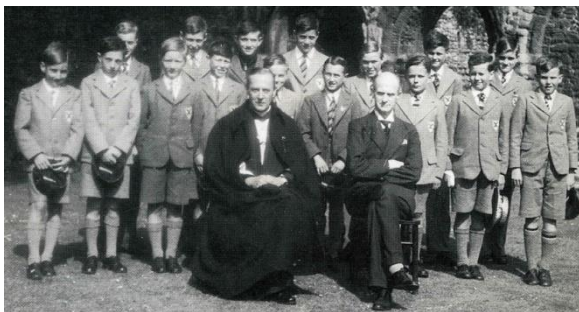
H. A. Bennett, Bishop Chavasse, Dean Crick.



The music library was in a small room off the South Transept. The 'Music Boys' had to assemble boxes of music for the week and take them over to the Practice room in the Choir School in a large wooden box with long handles, affectionately referred to as 'the coffin'.

1945

The choir, 1945, Dean Crick and H.A. Bennett.



The Cathedral was heated by large cast-iron coke stoves. There were, from time to time, altercations between the Organist, H. A. Bennett and the Vergers for their rattling and stoking the stoves before the end of the organ voluntary at the end of Evensong.

The Quire was lit by gas chandeliers. These made strange noises, and there are tales of the musical pitch of the singing being adjusted to blend with the 'whistling' lights.

1951

The choir boys in front of the Choir Screen prior to the Christmas Carol Service.



1956

The Choir of 1956, outside the north door of the Cathedral, on the occasion of the retirement of Harold Bennett as Organist and Master of the Choristers for twenty six years.

Back row, left to right: Jeremy Gadd, Richard Waldron, Christopher Elphick, David Martin, Kenneth Ashby (Crucifer), Roger Farman, Anthony Brooker, Colin Whyman, Graham Mitchell.

Middle row: Don Stephenson (Head Verger), Bill Grant (Bass Decani), Roger Cranmer, Ian Henderson, William Proctor, Alan Pope, 'Bunny' Austin (Alto Decani).

Seated: Mr. Mellor (Tenor Decani), Mr. Wilkins (Tenor Cantoris), Rev. Canon Vicary (Headmaster), Very Rev. Thomas Crick (Dean), Harold Bennett (Organist and Master of the Choristers), Rev. Canon Ball, Ron Dominey (Alto Cantoris), Mr. Kettle (Bass Cantoris).

Probationers: John Cramp, Mark Laming, and Michael Jarman who did not continue to become a chorister.



When Dr. Robert Ashfield became as Organist and Master of the Choristers in 1956, he changed the boys Eton collars to ruffs.

1957

In 1957, work was carried out on the organ by J. W. Walker and Sons. This scheme transformed the rather restrained 'old worthy' instrument of 1905 into a more colourful, brighter, and when necessary, more powerful instrument.

Scott Farrell, The Cathedral's Organ, in, Friends of Rochester Cathedral: Report 2015/2016, p.14.

and

Details in Hale, The Organs of Rochester Cathedral, p.30-33.

1959

Choir Practice moved from the Old Choir School in Minor Canon Row to the second floor of Gundulf Tower in the Cathedral.

1960

The Choir of 1960 in the Cloisters.

Far left, Joe Levett, and far right, Dr. Robert Ashfield.



1961

The Choir, with Choristers from the Chapels Royal, at the Royal Maundy Ceremony at Rochester Cathedral.



1968

A game of Conkers between the Choristers and Students of the Theological College.



1969

The Choir, 1969,

Seated, left, Dr. Robert Ashfield, and right, Joe Levett.



1983

In April 1983, the Choir, together with Canterbury Cathedral Choir, went on tour to the German Democratic Republic as part of the celebration of the five hundredth anniversary of Martin Luther's birth. The combined choirs sang at the Church of the Holy Cross, Dresden and the Churches of St Thomas and St George, Leipzig.

1986

The Choir of 1986 in the Crypt, led by Barry Ferguson.



1987

In 1987, the Choir gave recitals at Penshurst Place, Kent, and at the Guildhall, Rochester. The Choristers also took part in a Christmas Concert at the Albert Hall, London.

And in the same year, the choir travelled to Carlisle Cathedral to sing at the Installation of the Dean Canon Henry Stapleton who had previously been the Precentor at Rochester.

1989

The organ was rebuilt and expanded in 1989 by Manders, with a new Choir Organ added on the north side facing the quire.

This photograph, taken around the statue 'Mary and Christ Child' in the Cloister in 1989 shows the choir in blue cassocks.

Far right, Barry Ferguson.



1990

The choir of 1990.

Far left, Barry Ferguson, and far right, Roger Sayer.



1991

In 1991 the choir went on a European Tour with sixteen choristers and nine Lay Clerks. Performances were given at: St. Josef's Church, Trier. Musikschule Chapel, Konstanz. The Fraumunster, Zurich. St. Andrews, Zurich. Notre Dame de Paris, S. Severin, Paris. and S. Christophe de Javel.

1995

The Girls' Choir was founded in 1995. Their Début Concert was on Sunday, 18th November; conductor, William Whitehead, organ Roger Sayer. This is one of the earliest Girls' Choirs to be formed in a Cathedral. The girls are recruited from the King's School and other schools in the area.

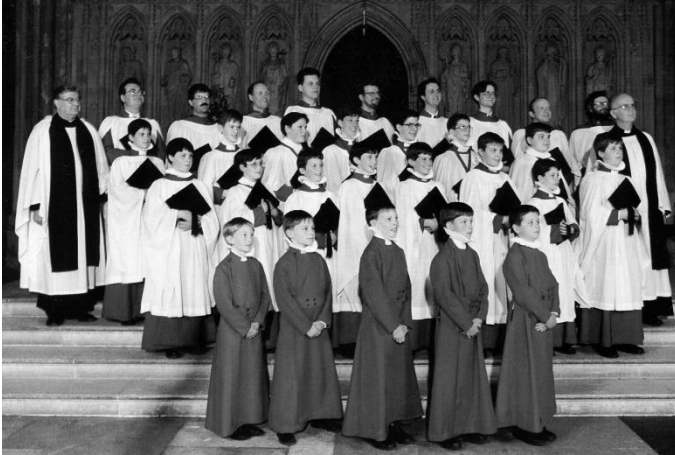


Also in 1995, two days after Easter, the Boys' Choir flew to Helsinki to sing in the Lutheran Cathedral. Followed, by ferry, to Estonia to sing in the Tallinn Concert Hall, a bilingual Eucharist in the Lutheran Cathedral, and finally, a performance at the Tartu University.

1996

The 1996 Choir Tour of the North Eastern States of America was made with sixteen boys, nine Lay Clerks, Director of Music, Roger Sayer, and two sub-organists. Seven concerts were given, including Christ Church, Rochester, NY.

The Boys' Choir and Lay Clerks of 1996.

**1997**

The Dean and Chapter launch the Cathedral Music Trust Appeal.

2007

The Cathedral Chapter commissioned Ralph Godsall and Roger Sayer to produce a report 'Worship and Music Policy'. This confronted the fears about sustainability of music in the Cathedral and the importance of music being:

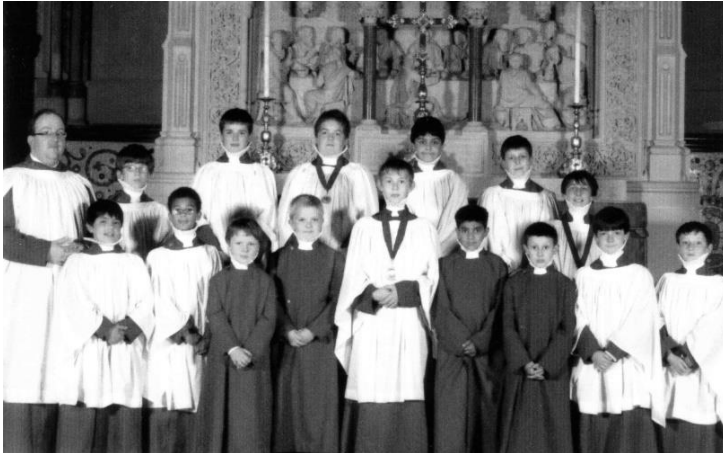
'The servant of the liturgy and an integral part of it. Music has a unique role in the offering of worship as a means to still the mind, uplift the heart and lead the worshipper to encounter the mystery that is God.'

The report made recommendations including a commitment to maintaining the music library, preservation of the Cathedral Organ, funding of the Choristers, and that the Director of Music should be first and foremost a choir trainer as ‘an experienced educationist’.

see: From Ancient to Modern, A 21st-Century Model for Cathedral Music, Scott Farrell. Cathedral Music, November, 2009.

2009

The Boys’ Choir of 2009 in front of the High Altar.



2012

In 2012 the Old Girl Choristers were welcomed into the Rochester Cathedral Old Choristers’ Association.

2015

The Practice Room in Gundulf Tower, Cantoris boys.



Choristers have sung in the cathedral for over one thousand four-hundred years and we all look forward to this history being continued for many more generations to come.