

Oxford Movement...

It's hard to believe that another year has come and gone, and there's still talk of restrictions and 'lock-downs' – but 2021 has seen Fitz Choir still in business.

In asking about possible Choir events, I got two kinds of reply. Half our people were very keen to sing, the other half unavailable or very wary – almost exclusively because of COVID, directly or indirectly. Two hoped-for northern events (in south Durham and in Hull) simply didn't happen because we couldn't raise a balanced group on the suggested dates.

Better news is that our planned trip to Oxford (postponed from 2020 when Christ Church Cathedral stood down all their summer choirs) did take place. A determined, dedicated dozen went for a five-day residency (slightly shorter than originally planned) from 18-22 August. With all of us pulling our weight (and no 'passengers'), it was a success – 'against all the odds', as one singer put it!



August 2021 – setting up music stands in the North Transept.



August 2021 – a brief S & A 'sectional' reh. beside the temporary Nelson organ.

It was great that Tamsin Brown (well known for her work as D-o-M at St John's, Newcastle) could join us – she and I shared playing and directing. Unusually, choirs sang in the North Transept of the cathedral rather than the choir stalls, with a temporary 2-manual organ (by Nelson of Durham – how weird is that!) and the chamber organ. Distancing was achieved in this quite generous space – with a good acoustic – and on the Sunday Tamsin gave us some glorious-sounding de Grigny on the main Rieger organ.

The summer also saw me clock up 50 years in church music – I started in summer 1971 at St Oswald's, Durham. It was nice to be offered a cathedral recital in mid-August, which turned out to be the first one back in our cathedral, after 18 months off-site due to all the building work. We marked both that return, and my half-century, with drinks after the recital; then at Oxford the Choir had a celebration curry too. Locally, Brinkburn Priory stayed open again – but sadly not for Choir gigs – and in September I played for the wedding of Michael Hepper's son. Michael has retired to Northumberland, having been a vicar in Ripon diocese; he and I had worked happily on a successful 2019 Lessons & Carols at Brinkburn, but it hasn't so far been repeated, for obvious reasons.



August 2021 – the Friday evening curry in Oxford, celebrating all our singers' efforts and my half-century in church music.



August 2021 – drinks on the lawn after the Sunday morning Eucharist.

Oxford wasn't without its difficulties. I think a long 'residency' is better than a short one, and there were some things we'd have liked to do but couldn't due to limited time. Then there was our car breakdown! Janet and I had reached Oxford, thankfully, when her car engine overheated – the radiator fan had failed. The AA got her (and all our music) to our parking

spot at the Music Faculty next to Christ Church... but then when we were to leave on the Monday they messed up arrangements for getting us home. We ended up in a very nice taxi for 260 miles at AA expense!

On the 'plus' side – first and foremost were our singers of course. We're often blessed with real cathedral singers, people who can hold a line alone if need be, either as regular lay-clerks or on a deputy basis. Of course not everyone is at that level, but those who aren't can gain hugely from singing alongside those who are. Then there's Sophie Biddell, who came to Newcastle in 2019 and suggested Oxford for our Choir. As our 'insider' Sophie (more than any other individual) made this visit happen – not least by putting me in touch with the Music Faculty, where we got the parking space free of charge for our entire visit.



August 2021 –
one of Paul
Busby's
ingenious
group photos.

Aside from choir and organ, I still enjoy my school work. Martin and I have also kept in touch with our preserved railways – respectively the East Lancs the South Tynedale, which re-opened from July. We haven't put on group events for our youth team (STRIVERS), but individual youngsters and their parents have visited during the season. We look forward to 2022, hoping for something nearer to 'normal'.

I'm still 'on the case' looking for Choir opportunities – circumstances permitting. Meanwhile, we'll again do our best to observe Advent before Christmas. Do let us know your news... and please stay safe!

Kieran
November 2021